

**The Issue Desk: an ethnography of participation, engagement and
social life in an everyday public library**

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Cardiff University School of Social Sciences**

October 2010

This thesis is being submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of PhD.

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Summary

This thesis presents an ethnographic study of a public branch library in a city suburb of South Wales. The research provides a detailed, grounded description of a public space divided by policy ambition and social service, and gives an account of the social life and social structure(s) within that public space. Fieldwork in the library was conducted over a fifteen month period. Participant observation and ethnographic conversations were used to generate qualitative data on the library as a site for learning, leisure and the front-line delivery of public policy.

The thesis focuses on four main areas of interest, the first of which is the somewhat elusive concept of what makes up a library's 'libraryness'. Through ethnographic description and analysis, the research explored those elements of the public library which account for its 'libraryness'; the inherent appeal of the service which makes it an attractive and valued social space for those who frequent it. This is explored as a recurrent theme running throughout the data and thesis. The second area centres around the ways in which the library is organised and used, and the techniques by which its success is judged. This enables an exploration of what counts as library provision and the ways in which, as a public policy arena, the library is made accountable and auditable. The third area of interest is the library as a public and community space; the ways in which a branch library is used for social interaction and how these account, in part, for the library service's appeal as a space for participation and engagement. Finally, the research reflects on contemporary policy debates in the library service, specifically how the service uses and promotes itself and its services, and the tensions between (and meanings of) educational, recreational and cultural uses of the public library.

**“There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the
Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office,
nor wealth receives the slightest consideration.”**

Andrew Carnegie

1. Introduction

This thesis reports on an ethnographic study of a small public branch library in a suburb – ‘Llancarreg’ – in South Wales. The research explores the ways in which the public library provides a site for a wide, and ever-increasing, variety of policy ambitions in relation to informal education, civic engagement, social inclusion and community.

Within UK public policy, it has been suggested that public libraries are an increasingly marginalised service (see Black & Muddiman, 1997; Coates, 2004, 2008; Comedia, 1993; Goulding, 2006b; Leadbeater, 2002; Usherwood, Wilson & Bryson, 2005). Cutbacks in resources, the pressures of competition from high street bookshops offering cheap and accessible reading material, and the emergence of the internet as a convenient and user-friendly reference point for knowledge, have all combined to make the library’s place in society less clearly-defined. There is evidence, however, that the service’s users often remain fiercely loyal to the library as an institution and to the values it espouses, with any perceived threat to the service being met by a robust defence (eg, Brown, 2008; Hanley, 2008). In this respect, the library represents a set of ideals around civic virtue (McMenemy, 2007; Newman, 2007) and the importance of informal learning (Coffield, 2000; Field & Schuller, 2000).

This discrepancy between the ideological importance of the library service to the public and its relative insignificance in policy circles has been characterised as “high public esteem and low political visibility” (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry, 1995: 43) – a description which the following chapters will consider in greater detail. Whilst the library service does at times attract political attention, it is often because of controversy or threats to the service rather than for any inherent theoretical or practical value of the institution to its users. The same can be said of the attention paid to libraries by the media, which frequently revolves around the challenges facing the service or around perceived attacks on traditional

notions of what a library should be.¹ This discrepancy between the service's appeal to its users and what actually gets reported about the service highlights how the service's traditions and history are challenged by changes in society. When the service changes or modernises, it is criticised for abandoning its core principles (Brown, 2008; Hanley, 2008); when it fails to modernise, it is portrayed as a cultural relic from a bygone era or as an out-of-touch service destined for decay (Coates, 2004; Leadbeater, 2002).

This is matched by another, similar, tension: one whereby ambitious policy goals (around participation, education, community, inclusion) are played out at ground level in ways which are often quite far-removed from the original intention. Any policy to promote 'civic engagement' or 'community'² necessarily invokes notions which are subjective and imprecise, meaning front-line staff often have to interpret any policy for themselves and decide how best to act upon it. In contrast, the core activities of the library (lending books, hosting activities, signing up new users) are measured in much more clearly-defined ways which can be equally problematic.³

This research is concerned with considering these tensions, processes and practices. It does so through examining the everyday manifestations of those predicaments by looking at the ground-level realities of the library service. If we accept that libraries are "street corner universities" (Broady-Preston & Cox, 2000: 149), then this research seeks to look at them at street level; in doing so, I aim to provide a grounded, qualitative account and analysis of the function, use and meaning of the public library. I also wish to reconsider some of the ideological and policy issues at stake.

¹ Hence headlines such as "Golden rule of libraries is quietly swept aside" (*Daily Mail*, 20th April 2009), "Our libraries are at risk – just when we need them most" (*Guardian*, 2nd April 2009) and "Anger at library cuts as ministers admit 40 have closed this year" (*Independent*, 31st December 2007)

² Such is the problematic and nebulous nature of these terms, they will (by necessity) be discussed frequently in the following chapters without always being unpacked in great depth. Chapters 2 and 6 will look at the concepts in greater depth; where the terms are used elsewhere, it is done with this acknowledgement that their use is contested and complicated.

³ As Chapter 5 will explore in relation to statistics and information-gathering in the library workplace.

The decision to use ethnography as the tool to gather data was a deliberate one; the branch library is a familiar and everyday setting, and ethnography itself “bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 2). As such, this research method offered a valuable and appropriate means by which to collect data which provided an in-depth qualitative account of the setting.

1.1: Research questions and aims

This qualitative project worked with a set of foreshadowed ideas and questions to inform and guide the research. By doing so, my intention was to put the data at the heart of the process and to allow emergent ideas to guide and inform the direction of the research rather than a single, governing hypothesis. In that respect, the study adopts Malinowski’s notion that “[p]reconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker” (Malinowski, 1922:9).

The primary contribution of this research is as a conventional ethnography of a familiar public social setting – the public library. As the next chapter will discuss in more detail, there has been a substantial amount of research (including qualitative studies) of the public library service, but most have approached the subject matter from an Information Science⁴ perspective rather than from a sociological/anthropological one. As such, there is a lack of descriptive data about the public branch library as a site for social (inter)action. This research seeks to go some way towards redressing that balance by portraying the library setting as a microcosm of the wider social world, with its own set of conventions and groups.

In keeping with ethnographic tradition, the research was relatively open-ended. However, the guiding principle which helped to focus the research and

⁴ By this, I refer to the interdisciplinary field concerned with the study of the collection, management and distribution of information. Examples of the field would be journals such as the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, *Information for Social Change*, *Library Review* and *Library Management*, and research schools like the Centre for Public Library and Information in Society at Sheffield University.

provide a framework for the findings centred around the concept of ‘libraryness’. Greenhalgh *et al* (1995) coined the term, and used it to refer to the set of values and qualities which form the public library service’s appeal in the mind of the public – its openness, its potential for self-improvement and liberation, its cultural role and cultural value. Expanding on the concept was therefore a key aim of this research and, in particular, explaining the social dynamics of the library is the element to which ethnographic enquiry is especially well-suited. The project concentrated on probing the concept of libraryness and considering what it denotes about everyday library usage, and this is reflected by the first and second set of research aims below. The term also recurs as a refrain throughout Chapters 4-8 in denoting particular elements of the service which contribute towards its unique appeal.

In considering this, I also hoped to address several other research questions and foreshadowed ideas which focus more directly on some of the public policy elements relating to the library and its activities, and in particular on how library policy is played out at a local level. This naturally follows on from the ‘libraryness’ element, because the values and appeal of the service are relevant to the development of library policy.⁵ The research therefore seeks to contribute to a wider body of literature around civic engagement and informal education.

The main research aims are therefore as follows:

- 1) To explore how the cultural and social aspirations and outcomes of a library are articulated and assessed; to consider how a local branch library makes sense of and interprets the social and cultural associations of ‘libraryness’
- 2) To engage critically with the relationship between local library services, civic engagement, democracy and understandings of a public sphere; in particular, how local services interpret national policy directives on such

⁵ Not least the current government review outlined in the *Passion For Excellence* document (DCMS, 2008a).

issues

- 3) To gain ethnographic understanding of the ways in which local libraries balance competing demands and expectations of service provision, particularly in the light of emerging technologies and consumer culture
- 4) To explore and document the varying and competing roles of the contemporary branch library, paying particular attention to policy aspirations in relation to leisure and learning

In exploring these aims, the research seeks to make three main contributions. The first is in relation to the concept of libraryness as outlined above; by identifying those qualities which have made the public library a traditionally strong and valued public institution and a key component of the liberal public sphere, the research hopes to distinguish and explore the features which lie at the heart of the service's role.

The second contribution lies with the ethnographic account of policy outcomes at ground level. By examining the everyday routines and practices of library life, and in particular by observing the individuals charged with running a branch library, it is possible to see how policy pronouncements and ambitions are played out and interpreted at the front line of the library service. Some policy ambitions might be vigorously pursued and executed effectively; some may be re-interpreted by staff with different ideas about what is suitable for their community; some may be ignored entirely. By observing and analysing these actions, the policy-making process itself can be held up to scrutiny. The next chapter will outline some of these policy ambitions in greater detail by exploring recent library policy specifically and then placing it in the wider context of contemporary debates around culture, participation and education.

The third contribution of the research is as an ethnography of the everyday. The decision to carry out a research project of a small, branch library in an ordinary suburb (as opposed to a larger, central library in a city or town centre, with all the attendant differences in resources, expectations and user groups) was

a very deliberate one. The next section will outline in greater detail why this research centres so heavily around the everyday and suburban life, and what the importance of those themes is to ethnographic research.

1.2: Everyday life, suburbia and the public library

Attending to the familiar and even banal features of everyday life, and extrapolating from them something meaningful about the social world is one of the cornerstones of ethnographic research. As the arena “where we develop our manifold capacities, both in an individual and collective sense, and become fully integrated and truly human persons” (Gardiner, 2000: 2), everyday life has a significance to the social researcher as the foundation of social life as a whole.

Defining what is meant by the ‘everyday’ is not without its problems, partly because by its nature the term is all-encompassing and subjective:

...everyone knew what [everyday life] was, and to study something with so much variety, so many individual examples, and so many possible disciplinary approaches or questions, meant that it was not a thing that formal knowledge could recognise as coherent. So what counted as everyday life depended on who was looking, and what they were looking at. (Hartley, 2003: 121)

The use of the term in this research draws on the conceptualisations of everyday life made by Henri Lefebvre (2008a, 2008b, 2008c), in which individuals are said to construct and make sense of their own identity through the everyday – being socially schooled in the theatre of the mundane. Our sense of what it is to be part of society is acquired through our engagement with its most banal forms – so much so, in fact, that the everyday takes on a transformational potential, becoming the arena in which social change can be effected; as Lefebvre has it, “genuine changes take place... [in] the unmysterious depths of everyday life” (2008a: 137).

It is for that reason that studying and seeking to understand the everyday takes on a sociological importance. Those events, practices and spaces that permeate existence are the ones which are hardest to identify and scrutinise; but

conversely, they are the ones which are most worthy of study because their importance is so ingrained. This dichotomy was not lost on the founders of the Mass-Observation movement:

If there is any moral responsibility of the scientist at all, it is that he should spend a part of his time... in studying normal and everyday behaviour problems of our own lives, as actually lived in the houses and factories, pubs and chapels and shops in this sort of civilisation. Above all, it is the job of the scientist to find out, in this field, what people do want, do get, don't get and could get to want. (Madge & Harrison, 1939: 231)

It is those familiar social terrains ('the houses and factories, pubs and chapels') which say the most about society, yet it is these which sometimes receive little attention. Nowhere is this truer than the humble suburb – a common and recognisable social landscape, but one which is infrequently the object of sociological attention:

The countryman comes up to town – he is to be seen any day, one is told, with a straw in his mouth, standing agape at Piccadilly Circus – and the townsman goes to the country, to hike up the Derbyshire dales or spend weekends in cottages in damp Sussex woods. But neither of them ever makes an expedition into suburbia. They little know what they would find there. (Richards, 1973: 33)

Put another way, sociology frequently attends to The Street ('street-corner', 'street-level', 'off the street'), but it pays far less much attention to The Avenue, The Close or The Grove – the stereotypically tree-lined streets of semi-detached, double-driveway family homes with ample gardens, good amenities and handy transport links to the busier towns. It is odd that these suburban areas do not receive a proportionate amount of sociological attention compared to their urban counterparts, particularly when one considers "the appeal it holds for ninety out of a hundred Englishmen⁶, an appeal which cannot be explained away as some strange instance of mass aberration" (Richards, 1973: 17).

Why is it, therefore, that the suburbs – which for so many people are the epitome of everyday life, in which the most commonplace social exchanges take

⁶ Or, for that matter, ninety out of a hundred Welshmen – there seems no reason why Richards' generalisation should not hold true here as well.

place – are not crawling with ethnographers and anthropologists keen to examine the coalface of ordinary life? The answer lies, partly at least, in the lack of a romantic pull to the suburban environment:

This world is rarely written about, because people in the national media and the arts don't live here and don't come here, even if they come from here. For them, 'getting real' means the extreme poverty of the inner cities. The mundanity of the typical life passes them by. (Baggini, 2007: 11/12)

This remark is significant in noting how attention on 'real life' all too frequently focuses on the extreme rather than the median, even though it is in the commonplace, less conspicuous and lower-profile places that the realities of everyday life are to be found. The perceived unglamorous and humdrum nature of suburbia makes it victim to such a standpoint. Ignoring the suburbs as a site for sociological enquiry is motivated by this same skewed perception of "the wonky concrete architecture of the industrial estates, there beneath the bleak glow of the retail park lights, and there in conformist squadrons of Barratt estates told apart only by the cars on the drives" (Dean, 2009). This supposed predictability makes the suburbs easy to deride, whether for the uniform architecture of the semi-detached⁷ mock-Tudor homes or for the stereotypical cultural conservatism of those who inhabit them:

...middle-income housing projects... are truly marvels of dullness and regimentation, sealed against the buoyancy or vitality of city life. (Jacobs, 2000: 14)

Village, town and city are... presented as 'proper' settlements; the suburb is by contrast a place lacking in identity, a focus or a purpose. (Matless, 1994: 78)

...suburbanites are people who are afraid to live in a world they cannot control... A fear of the richness of urban society prevails in both the early industrial city and the post-industrial suburbs of the middle class, and the family becomes a refuge in which parents try to shield their children, and themselves, from the city. (Sennett, 1970: 72)

Yet to write off the residents of suburbia simply as cultural conservatives

⁷ To quote Richards again: "Is there any significance in the fact that what we call a semi-detached house the Americans call a semi-attached?" (1973: 7) – a linguistic nuance which subtly, but importantly, reaffirms the depiction of British suburbanites as people who like their personal space and distance, 'keeping themselves to themselves'.

somehow afraid of the supposedly more laudable and 'proper' ambience of the busy city is to do those suburbanites a great disservice. Many of the factors which make the suburb the object of ridicule are actually subtly linked to factors which account for its appeal. The derided uniformity and conventionality of the suburbs can be seen as positive qualities which make the suburbs desirable places to raise a family. The charge of isolationism can be answered by pointing to some of the more communal elements of suburban life – the community groups and spaces, the casual acquaintances and so on. For every negative connotation of suburban life, there is an equally generous interpretation which can be made, and this goes some way towards accounting for their attraction to their inhabitants (Jagose, Martin & Healy, 2003). In this way, the 'regimented' and 'dull' housing estates attacked by Jacobs (2000) are often embraced by their occupants for their spaciousness and peacefulness. When Sennett (1970) pejoratively describes the suburbs as a refuge, he is simultaneously recognising that it is precisely those qualities of safety and cleanliness which make the suburbs a welcome environment for people seeking those attributes for their family home. Suburbia needs to be accepted, discussed and analysed on its own terms and by its own merits.

There is another implied misconception of suburbia which relates to sociological debate. The concept of 'action' within sociological enquiry (see Goffman, 1969) centres around the fundamental belief that the areas most worthy of study are those where the greatest activity and conflict can be found. The argument runs that there is more to be analysed and written about places, societies and situations which attract or contain a great deal of 'action' than those where there is little. The suggestion of suburbia is that it suffers from a lack of 'action', manifested in the social isolation, spiritual impoverishment, cultural homogeneity, political conservatism and parochialism identified in the table above. Some critics (Sennett being one) would suggest that this is the result of a fear of social action and the conflict it could bring, and it is this suggestion with which I would take issue.

Fear is an instinctive, involuntary emotion, but the avoidance of conflict and risk within suburbia is not involuntary; it is much more considered and

deliberate. Baumgartner in *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (1988) puts forward a coherent argument for the suburbs being an environment of “moral minimalism” (1988: 10) in which conflict is studiously avoided, even when it puts the social actors involved to great inconvenience. Far from being a negative, risible attribute of a community perpetually afraid of risk, “these conditions actually foster a moral order largely devoid of violence and rancour and noteworthy for civility and forbearance” (Baumgartner, 1988: 3). The fact that conflict is averted should be seen as a virtue rather than be depicted as an avoidance of risk.

Whatever suburbia’s much-criticised shortcomings, it is an environment which holds an element of desirability; and, moreover, it is one with which a very large number of people are familiar because it forms the terrain of their everyday lives. It is for this reason that the research undertaken in this project deliberately sets out to observe life in suburbia rather than to focus on the well-trodden path of urban studies.⁸

A similar decision with similar reasoning was made over the research site itself. The public library is an unquestionably familiar and everyday setting. However, it also embodies something more socially significant. Libraries are not merely passive examples of everyday ideas and values; they have a symbolic importance as active proponents of them. It is for this reason that communities react with outrage when their local library branch is threatened with closure, or why there can be such sensitivity to proposals to ‘modernise’ them (Brown, 2008; DCMS, 2008a; Hanley, 2008). As objects of civic pride and civic identity, libraries embody and symbolise the everyday lives of the communities they serve, particularly in smaller areas where such communities are easier to identify and define.

It would have been an obvious choice to focus attention on the flagship city centre libraries as the most obvious embodiment of these civic values, or to study the desperately put-upon and embattled inner-city library. Such libraries might be in contemporary, eye-catching public buildings like the flagship Idea

⁸ Although elements of urban studies, particularly in relation to research methods, are drawn upon in the chapters which follow.

Stores London⁹, and may have resources which put them at the cutting edge of service provision. Yet although these buildings do indeed provide a conspicuous focus for civic pride, they are emphatically not environments which are ‘everyday’ or familiar. By their very design, emphasis and – crucially – spending power, they are separate from the more recognisable surroundings of the smaller branch libraries in the suburbs. It is in these branches that everyday suburban life is carried out in its most mundane forms. For that reason, this study occupies and explores the middle ground, and it is with this sort of environment that this research concerns itself and seeks to make a contribution.

1.3: Thesis structure

The thesis is structured across nine chapters. Chapter 2 outlines relevant literatures which have informed this study and to which the research will seek to make a contribution. It focuses on the policy literature relating directly to the public library service and then moves on to examine academic contributions. It includes a discussion of the themes which run through the research data: culture, informal learning, civic engagement and community.

Chapter 3 sets out the methods used in this study and details some of the ethnographic work which has influenced and informed the methods applied in this research. It also explores some of the ethical decisions made prior to the data collection and explains the means by which data was analysed. Specific reference is made to other relevant writers who have used ethnography to undertake sociological research; this helps locate this particular study and explain why the methods used in this case were both appropriate and necessary.

Chapter 4 offers a descriptive ethnographic introduction to the research setting, building up a picture of the library and social life in the suburb of Llancarreg. It is this chapter which gives the greatest indication of what

⁹ These libraries in Tower Hamlets and elsewhere were rebranded to become “more than just a library or a place of learning... offer[ing] a wide range of adult education classes, along with career support, training, meeting areas, cafes and arts and leisure pursuits” – see www.ideastore.co.uk for more information.

constitutes 'libraryness' in a typical suburban branch library, and which provides the backdrop for the subsequent substantive chapters.

Chapter 5 looks at the bureaucratic apparatus of the branch library and explores its role and effect on the library. As part of that discussion, the nature of 'culture' in the library is discussed, and specific consideration is given to the battles in the branch over cultural provision. These issues are then analysed in comparison with policy objectives – for example, whether it is possible to reconcile ambitions to make libraries 'cultural' (in the sense of high culture) whilst at the same time making them repositories of popular material.

Chapter 6 explores two of the related themes which recurred in the research setting – those of civic engagement and community. Both concepts are familiar within public policy literature (both for the library service and beyond) and are relevant to those institutions which underpin notions of a 'liberal public sphere'. This chapter unpacks the terms themselves and then seeks to consider how they – along with paradigms around inclusion and social mobility – are interpreted and manifested at ground-level in the public arena.

Chapter 7 explores the ever-changing demands on the contemporary library service and explores how a branch library adapts to the demands of modern user groups. The chapter includes a discussion about the role(s) of information technology in the library branch, the way it is used by library users and the way that staff police and promote it. The chapter also examines how the library promotes itself at branch level, exploring how an institution such as the public library with a diverse set of aims can 'sell' itself and its services. Consideration is given to the discrepancies between the expectations of some existing users for a 'traditional' library service (and indeed what such a description comprises) and the urgency with which modernisation is being pursued at a (national) policy level.

Chapter 8 addresses the dual ambitions of education and leisure which are both cornerstones of the public library but which also create a potentially problematic set of ambitions for front-line services. The two aims are often seen

as complementary, but the data from this research hints at an underlying conflict between the two. These are outlined implicitly throughout the findings chapters, and are discussed explicitly in this chapter in specific relation to public policy.

Chapter 9 then returns to the research questions, summarising the main arguments of the substantive chapters and considering their implication on policy ambitions, particularly in light of current policy debates. The chapter also offers some suggestions for further research on the topic.

With this structure now established, the following chapter will outline relevant literatures to this research and explain the policy debates and paradigms which provided the context for this study.

2. Library issues: a policy context of the UK library service

The British public library is a space which offers the potential for generating rich ethnographic data. It is a setting which is open to all members of the public, free at the point of access, offering a range of services, and identifiable as a centre of civic activity for the community it serves.¹⁰ Moreover, it is a site in which public policy ideals meet with the ‘real world’ of everyday lived experience – where brave policy ambitions often have to be compromised by lack of resources, time or demand on the part of staff and users.

As such, the public library service is the subject of intense debate from the perspectives of both public policy and academic inquiry. A broad range of literatures have contributed towards our understanding of public libraries and informed their use. This chapter will seek to identify and discuss those which are most notable or which have a particular relevance to this research, as well as reflecting on other related themes which run through the data.

The chapter will start by outlining the often confused and occasionally contradictory policy context in which the public library service operates. In particular, it will examine the system by which policy directives are given at two (and sometimes three) levels of government, with the efficacy of each being dependent on its department’s level of influence at the time. It will also aim to emphasise how the library service’s ideological roots lie closer to conceptualisations of traditional welfare provision than current policy documents might suggest. The range of influences at a policy level have resulted in different emphases being given to how individual local authorities, or even local branches, choose to provide a library service. This, in turn, has had an impact upon users’ experiences of everyday life in this familiar public setting. Meanwhile, the history of the service in different geographical areas has also played a significant part in

¹⁰ The very term ‘community’ is, of course, a contested one and will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. For now, the use of the word in its naïve sense to describe a group with a set of shared characteristics which separates it from other groups will suffice.

shaping users' expectations and perceptions of what their local branch(es) will provide.

The chapter will then move on to examine the range of academic work relating to the public library service. Some of these works have approached the subject from a sociological standpoint, but the majority emanates from the discipline of Information Science. While this thesis approaches the subject firmly from a sociological perspective, there is a great deal to be gleaned from the literatures of library professionals, so relevant literature from these fields will be drawn upon. Amongst other things, this discussion will help to identify elements of the 'libraryness' of the service which makes it attractive as a social space to the communities it serves, and how these elements have helped to create a public perception of a space which is value-free, non-judgemental, open to all and publicly-focused – one which “embodies a principle of rights of access to knowledge and the power that the acquisition of knowledge implies” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 59).

The chapter will then turn its attention to other relevant themes which run parallel to many of the library-specific literatures. Some of these pertain only to small areas of discussion and will be examined at the relevant point in the later substantive chapters,¹¹ but there are three themes which need to be discussed explicitly at an early stage because of the frequency with which they recur later on. The themes in question are citizenship, education and culture; the library service is either a provider or a facilitator of all three, and no analysis of public libraries can avoid contemporary debates around these ideas. Their direct relevance to the library service will be examined in detail in later chapters; here the aim is to outline some of the general issues around each by way of context. In particular, I will focus on the continuums which are apparent in each theme – between active/passive citizenship, formal/informal learning and high/popular culture, all three of which form part of debates in later chapters.

Before moving on to the substantive part of the chapter in which relevant

¹¹ For example, the literatures concerning audit cultures which are discussed in chapter 5.

literatures will be considered, it is first necessary to unpack the term ‘public library service’ which will be used throughout the chapter (and the thesis) to refer to the network of libraries within the UK. The term is over-simplistic in that it implies one holistic institution when, as will be demonstrated, the real situation is rather different. The service can more accurately be portrayed as a loose affiliation of public libraries operating with different priorities and different budgets across the local authorities of the constituent areas, with the added input of policy from devolved governments or Westminster.

Moreover, the use of the word ‘public’ to describe the library service is not without its difficulties. The familiarity and over-use of the terms ‘public sphere’, ‘public realm’, ‘public service’, have diminished any clear definition of what it is to be a member of ‘the public’. Its importance in relation to the library service is a case in point – as “an icon of the liberal public sphere in its own right, and as an institution that mediates changing conceptions of public culture” (Newman, 2007: 888), the public library is particularly well-positioned to embody some of the civic values which manifest elements of public life. The library “neither belongs to the state nor to the free market but is independent of both” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 12) and is therefore a perfect illustration of the public sphere in action. Not only that, but the “open debate, critical scrutiny, full reportage, increased accessibility, and independence” (Webster, 1995: 103) of the modern public state are values synonymous with the public library service (Williamson, 2000). It is against this backdrop that the ‘public’ of ‘public library’ must be considered.

The chapter will now set out the policy framework within which the library service operates. Much of the relevant literature takes the form of government white papers for the library service (either at a national or regional level), and it is these documents which will be referred to throughout the substantive chapters, both implicitly and explicitly, as being the policy background against which individual libraries operate on a day-to-day basis.

2.1: Library policy: welfare, culture or both?¹²

The place of the library service in British public policy has been a contested one, primarily because the service has historically been hard to group with other areas of government provision. With its formal roots spreading back to the 1850 Public Libraries Act, the service predates many of the formal areas of state welfare provision, and in the twentieth century has arguably been sidelined as a result. This has resulted in a situation where the service exists on the periphery of the public policy sphere, with a complicated variety of political influences at different levels of government. Nationally, the UK's libraries are funded and organised on a local authority basis, with national / regional administrations also having an input into policy and capital expenditure as appropriate. Yet, despite this complex web of influences, the library service has remained a generally well-used and valued institution by the public during the last century, resulting in a dichotomy between public and political evaluations of the service (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995).

While the library service may not be considered strictly as an arm of welfare provision in a political sense, the publics who use it have traditionally relied on it for services which broadly seem consistent with welfarist aims (Black, 2000; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995). As such, it is possible to locate the service as a key component of the liberal public sphere and modern conceptions of social policy. Indeed, if social policies are designed to “improve human welfare... and to meet human needs for education, health, housing and social security” (Blakemore, 2003: 1), then it is possible to locate public libraries and lifelong learning within them. Because of their role in ‘formal’ child education, ‘informal’ adult education, in social inclusion, and in welfare-to-work programmes, it is generally accepted that “the library service has an important, though limited place in the Welfare State” (Irwin, 1978: 25). Libraries also have a role to play as a symbol of public good and public order – in the 1850 Parliamentary debate which resulted in the birth of the service, one MP went as far as to describe libraries as ‘cheaper than policemen’ for this very reason.

¹² The substantive chapters of the thesis were written in 2009, and the thesis was examined in January 2010. The thesis therefore does not deal with the policy debates leading up to the 2010 general election or the aftermath thereof. References to the British government refer to the Labour administration of 2005-2010.

Despite this, histories of British social policy (eg, Timmins, 2001) have often ignored libraries, or viewed their role as a more indirect one because they do not come under the auspices of traditional ‘welfarist’ policy. Yet the language used by government in forming library policy post-1997 is almost indistinguishable from that used in policy documents on, for example, education or health. The familiar terminology – ‘joined-up government’, ‘inclusion’, ‘citizen-based participation’, ‘community’, ‘choice’, ‘democratic renewal’, ‘empowerment’, ‘civic engagement’, ‘social diversity’, ‘partnership working’, ‘sustainability’ – has been visible consistently across policy documents about public services since 1997 (see, for example, Giddens, 2000; Lister, 1998; Newman, 2001). In this respect, the public library service is no different and has been just as susceptible to policy vogues and trends as other public services, as the next section will explain.

2.1.1: National policies

It is within this policy culture that the two most comprehensive policy documents of the post-1997 Labour government era relating to a national policy framework for the public library service have been formulated. Whilst the devolved nature of the library service means that many decisions are taken at a local level (see section 2.1.2), these two documents still have a resonance across the service in setting out national government priorities for the service – even if, at grassroots level, many of those objectives are not pursued particularly vigorously. The two documents in question – *Libraries For All: social inclusion in public libraries* (DCMS, 1999) and *Framework for the Future: libraries, learning and information in the next decade* (DCMS, 2003) – are the ones which have had the strongest influence over the library service at a UK-wide level, and are therefore the ones which significantly relate to and inform my own analysis.

The first document (*Libraries For All*) was a white paper which centred government ambitions for the service around the desire to promote social inclusion. In recent times, ‘social inclusion/exclusion’ have become familiar buzzwords, perhaps even to the point of becoming clichés or jargon, and now

even surpassed by contemporary debates around social mobility (HMG, 2009). In the immediate post-1997 era, however, the inclusion discourse lay at the heart of government policy thinking. Within the New Labour consensus, the vagueness of the term allowed it to bridge the ideological gap between traditional socialism and contemporary social liberalism (Bowring, 2000; Byrne, 1999; Levitas, 1996). To one audience, the term ‘inclusion’ espoused brave notions of addressing social inequalities, whilst to another it fitted in with conceptions of a benign liberal state helping citizens to fulfil their own individual potential.

Within the library sector, the term was no less conspicuous, lying at the heart of the (then) new government’s first significant policy diktat. The introduction made it clear from the very first sentence that tackling exclusion was the primary policy aim:

One of the Government’s highest priorities is to combat social exclusion. Many organisations within the cultural sector have important contributions to make to this campaign, but few are likely to be as well placed as public libraries to generate change... A regenerated and proactive library sector can help both individuals and communities to develop skills and confidence, and help improve social networking.¹³ (DCMS, 1999: 4)

That mission, to regenerate a proactive library service to combat exclusion, identified a new ideological purpose for the library service in the first decade of the 21st Century. As has already been mentioned, the term ‘inclusion’ has been a nebulous one within policy literature, but in this particular instance, the document defined it as being:

To promote the involvement in culture and leisure activities of those at risk of social disadvantage, particularly by virtue of the area they live in; their disability or age, racial or ethnic origin. To improve the quality of people’s lives by these means. (DCMS, 1999: 8)

While this rhetoric now feels familiar – even platitudinous – it is worth considering for a moment its distinctiveness from some of the policy analysis of

¹³ While the term has no major relevance to the discussion here, the mention of ‘social networking’ is interesting, coming as it did in the pre-Facebook/MySpace era. In only ten years, both the significance of the expression and the change in social communication which it denotes have transformed the growing role(s) of IT within library. This is a theme which will be picked up in more detail in Chapter 6.

the previous years. The focus on inclusion/exclusion represented a shift-change in emphasis from debates earlier in the same decade around notions of an 'underclass' (Field, 1989; Murray, 1990, 1994), cut adrift from society, seemingly without hope of redemption. The more sympathetic ambitions espoused in the post-1997 era appeared, in contrast, as a breath of fresh air. The *Libraries For All* document, therefore, was not only about tackling some of the "infrastructure barriers" within the service "which constrain the 'connectedness' of a given neighbourhood" (DCMS, 1999:10); it was also about fundamentally shifting the emphasis of public policy so that public libraries became more of a proactive service offering a 'helping hand' to disadvantaged users.

The difficulty with the new policy lay in the inherent difficulties in enacting ambitious goals in a meaningful sense at a local level (Black, 2000; Goulding, 2006b). This, of course, is not a new problem for public services (see, for example, Lipsky, 1980 – which will be explored in much greater detail in the substantive chapters). The fuzzy nature of the inclusion concept which had made it so appealing politically also made it hard to measure the success or failure of policies in action. Indeed, as later chapters will highlight, the grassroots branch is challenged by a whole different set of much more mundane issues which make it hard for staff to identify, let alone tackle, abstract notions of inclusion. That is not to say that some of the policy aims were not practical. There were clear-cut ambitions for more flexible opening hours, affordable or (as ultimately happened) free IT access, and partnerships with other learning organisations. But many – most – were more like statements of intent than grounded, achievable targets for an already-stretched service.

Suggestions included compelling library authorities to "consult and involve socially excluded groups in order to ascertain their needs and aspirations" (DCMS, 1999: 14) without mentioning the paradox that excluded groups by definition would be the hardest groups with whom to engage, nor how branches outside of inner-city or deprived areas might identify socially excluded groups in largely affluent communities. It was suggested that libraries "should develop their role as a community resource centre, providing access to communication as well as information" (DCMS, 1999: 16), which rightly identified the need for closer

ties with the local population, but was again short on detail of how this might be achieved. At times the terminology used seemed almost deliberately problematic: the line “[l]ibraries should be the local learning place and champion of the independent learner” (DCMS, 1999: 17) ignored the consideration of how some of the proposed ideas to reinvigorate libraries might actually threaten, rather than strengthen, the environment of the independent learner seeking intellectual solitude.

Nevertheless, the focus on inclusion did at least redirect a service which had felt increasingly directionless as the new millennium dawned. The trend of “stagnation in the eighties... accelerating decline in the nineties... [leading to] crisis at the Millennium” (Moore, 2003) had arguably been averted, as a new ideological zeal allowed the library profession to re-orientate the service in a fresh direction. Aligning the service to conceptualisations of ‘community’ is not a new proposition – Usherwood (1981), notably, argued for a more responsive, community-focused and proactive service, whilst Black & Muddiman (1997) have comprehensively charted the history of ‘community librarianship’ as a concept – but these arguments have largely taken place amongst library professionals rather than policy-makers, and have often only been realised at a local level. Under the post-1997 Labour government, the centrality to library policy of community involvement and social inclusion demonstrated that the ideological battles of the 1980s had largely been won by those advocating a more responsive, consumer-focused agenda.

The same topics of inclusion and community values were reinforced in 2003 in the *Framework For The Future* white paper (DCMS, 2003), but with extra emphasis being given to IT provision to reflect the rise of technology during the intervening years. Hence, ‘The People’s Network’¹⁴ and ‘digital citizenship’ became prevalent phrases within the policy literature. Moreover, the document set out the ten-year strategy for libraries, with the following identified as some of the priorities to be completed by 2013:

¹⁴ This was the government’s plan to install free internet access in public libraries which has since transformed into scheme promoting libraries and technology to the public – see www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk

- Anyone seeking a book can be guaranteed to get access to it through the library whether or not it is still in print...
 - Any adult struggling with adult basic skills can turn to a library for personalised intensive help...
 - Any community group can turn to the library for help in creating, hosting and managing community content online
 - Any citizen can engage with government services, debate and consultation online through a library...
 - And libraries will still be places where anyone can learn, discover, reflect or imagine without being questioned, asked to show a membership card, or required to book an appointment¹⁵
- (from DCMS, 2003: 51)

Two things are particularly striking about these suggestions. Clearly, the role of IT and providing online services had risen up the policy agenda since the 1999 policy, but the degree to which it permeates the ten-year plan is striking. Just as ‘inclusion’ (however manifested) was seen to be an answer to inequality in 1999, the possibilities offered by IT provision seemed to be identified as the answer to crises around civic engagement, with digital citizenship and e-democracy being proudly trumpeted as crucial parts of the library service’s future.

The other significant thing about the priorities is that they are much more limited in their scope in terms of setting fewer, and more measurable, targets. The aspirations around social inclusion remained part of the document, but the specific measures outlined were much less ambiguous in what they were demanding of grassroots services. The policy acknowledged that “[t]he role of central government is to... set out a small number of national expectations for the public library service to deliver” (DCMS, 2003: 44), implicitly acknowledging the problems with the 1999 document. Moreover, the post-devolution political climate in which the 2003 policy was forged meant that, by necessity, the policy’s scope had to be more limited to reflect the declining influence of the DCMS in effecting change in Scotland and Wales (with the latter being of specific relevance to this research).

¹⁵ It would be churlish here not to acknowledge the linguistic shift between the 2003 paper and its 1999 predecessor; this final bullet point in particular reflects a very noble and admirable set of aspirations for the service which contrast with some of the more inane passages from the 1999 policy document.

2.1.2: Sub-national policies and devolution

The devolved localism of the library service is not a new phenomenon – thirty years ago it was accepted that the service was “best regarded as a system of free, local, independent units; cooperating together... but not under any form of national administration” (Irwin, 1978: 25). However, the post-devolution era has further marginalised Whitehall’s influence on local library services.¹⁶ This has been emphasised in policy priorities (a point which will be discussed in greater detail later), but also has a lot to do with the history of the service. In particular, the role of miners’ institutes in the development of the library service has largely been seen to have given South Wales’ libraries a different ethos – amongst others, Francis (1976) and Rose (2001) have written at much greater length about the “underground university” (Rose, 2001: 238) which collieries developed to further the intellectual and cultural capacity of miners. Yet there has been criticism in recent years that the service has not been maintained at the level which its historical importance deserves; for example, Roberts (2006) highlighted the paucity of some of the service’s physical buildings, whilst CyMAL (2006) pointed to the need for greater efforts to attract new users.

In recent years, the Welsh Assembly Government has commissioned research and published new strategies for the Welsh public library service through CyMAL, the Government body which oversees policy for Museums, Archives and Libraries. This culminated recently in the 2008 strategic development programme, *Libraries For Life* (CyMAL, 2008a). This document effectively combines broad-brush abstract policy ambitions with grounded, research-based commitments for the country’s library network. On one level, this is not an unrealistic expectation – Wales has around three hundred static library sites (Roberts, 2006, put the figure at 311 but in the intervening three years branches have opened, closed, merged and moved) which should theoretically be a more manageable proposition for CyMAL than for its English equivalent, the MLA. Nevertheless, the geographical spread of the branches, plus the attendant different localised pressures and resources, mean that there are still a wide range of service

¹⁶ And, indeed, on public services as a whole; for example, Ashworth *et al* (2001) have written about the changing balance of power in Wales in the aftermath of devolution.

provisions across Wales. *Libraries For Life* set out to standardise the most basic level of provision, with the aim of ensuring that all libraries would work towards providing the following basic elements to their service:

- Free to join
 - Borrow books for free
 - Free reservation of requests for books within Wales
 - Borrow anywhere, return anywhere in Wales
 - No overdue charges for children
 - Free use of the Internet and computers
 - Free use of online information resources
 - Friendly staff on hand to help
- (from CyMAL, 2008a: 20)

As well as providing consistency across the service nationally, these core elements would also see a level of co-operation across local authorities which had not existed hitherto, by (for example) allowing users to borrow and return books anywhere in the country. Combined with a series of public library standards for the current Assembly term (CyMAL, 2008b) and a marketing strategy for libraries (CyMAL, 2006), the policies for improving Wales' library network appear in one sense to be based around more attainable, more understandable and more focused objectives than the English or UK-wide equivalents. It is within this policy context that this research examines one very localised example of a branch library operating under a complex range of national, sub-national and local expectations.

Library policy on both a national and sub-national level continues to evolve, and there have been further attempts to re-orientate policy in recent years as a fresh set of politicians and policy-makers seek to stamp their mark on the service.¹⁷ Most recently, the DCMS' *Passion For Excellence* document (DCMS, 2008a) has set out to generate debate over the future of Britain's cultural sector. Within the library service, this has culminated in the 'modernisation review' which hints "not merely at rebranding but also at a radical rethink of [libraries'] contemporary purpose" (*Guardian* editorial, 20th October 2008). Strong reactions

¹⁷ Indeed, policy has continued to evolve during the conducting and analysis of fieldwork for this research. Whilst the majority of these new policy ambitions were broadly already part of the library service in one form or another, it underlines the constantly shifting nature of the service and the challenges which face staff trying to comply with ever-changing policy demands.

were elicited by suggestions that the review might welcome library users being allowed to eat and drink in branches, or to talk on mobile phones without fear of opprobrium,¹⁸ with some seeing such changes as a welcome revolution (eg, Brown, 2008) and others citing them as “a slackening... of what ought to be universal goods, in order to accommodate the flakiness, the distractedness, of everyday life” (Hanley, 2008). The final direction of the review is not yet apparent, but the strong feelings elicited within the media and the academic community over changes to the service indicate the challenge to the service if it is to evolve for a modern audience whilst still retaining an attraction for its core users.

Having outlined some of the main policy directives at both national and sub-national levels, the next section engages with some of the discourse around the library service and policy critiques.

2.2: ‘The right to know’ – principles and critiques of libraries

The policy literatures outlined so far account for only a fraction of the writing about public library provision, and represent only one perspective on the service, its staff, its users and its practices. Away from the official pronouncements of policy at various tiers of government lies a range of academic critiques, discourses and debates about the public library network, augmented by additional literatures from think-tanks, charities and lobby groups, and it is these literatures to which attention will now be turned.

Sociological research around public libraries accounts for only a fraction of academic work on the issue. The discipline more frequently given to consideration of libraries is that of Information Science, and the focus of the discipline generally centres around issues of library management and practice whilst also touching on some of the values which underpin the service. In some cases, the methods used to research these topics provide the type of rich data

¹⁸ In actual fact, as this research will show, these things already happen in branches regardless of any official rules either prohibiting or promoting them. Staff and other users, by and large, are far too polite to reprimand or criticise.

which allows for comparisons with this study. For this reason, some of the research from the Information Science discipline will be discussed in the following section, as it directly informs the research carried out in this project, and can be used to critique some of the policies outlined above. It is not, however, my intention to discuss more than the few specifically pertinent examples from Information Science in this literature review. The approach to the data in this research was sociological, and therefore the most directly relevant literature is that which considers public libraries and other public settings from the same methodological viewpoint. Relevant literatures from other disciplines will be drawn upon in the findings chapters later on when the data from this study relates to, or informs, particular debates. In this section, therefore, a smaller number of highly-relevant literatures will be given detailed consideration in relation to specific themes which dominate discourse over the library service. I will also use the debates within academic discourse to re-engage with some of the policy themes outlined in the previous section.

The introduction chapter and the first research question make specific reference to the concept of ‘libraryness’, and it makes sense here to discuss the term by way of introducing some of the academic and ideological debates around the library service. The term is used extensively in *Libraries in a World of Cultural Change* (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995) – a book which meticulously outlines many of the challenges which face the library service and which is as relevant now as it was when it was first published.

Taking its lead from an earlier report by the same authors (Comedia, 1993), it comprehensively outlines the arguments for a more consumer-friendly service and the increasing role of technology which has become central to the service in a very short space of time. Moreover, it also provides a detailed account of the ideological foundations of the service, and the quirks and idiosyncrasies which give libraries their ‘libraryness’ and accounts for their continued appeal to the most loyal patrons:

‘Libraryness’ partly derives from the large-scale presence of books, which themselves historically evince a quasi-religious or spiritual aura... But there are other general attributes accepted as part of the library...

The library is seen as being informed with the historical principle of ‘the right to know’... [It] is regarded as democratic, non-partisan, above sectional interests...[It] is still seen as a ‘window on the world’... [It] is regarded as a sanctuary, a place where one may sit, read, browse, sleep and remain unharassed; nobody is judged and therefore nobody is found wanting. (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 51-2)

That list remains an awe-inspiring creed for the public library service and those responsible for running it. Greenhalgh *et al* take it as the service’s core values, and then consider how those values can be maintained and extended in the face of modern challenges.

That same ideological zeal has underpinned frequently the public library service, with libraries seen as having “iconic status as a symbol of liberal governance” (Newman, 2007: 892) or “being informed with the historical principle of ‘the right to know’, of civic rights, of the freedom of knowledge” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 51). At the other end of the spectrum, its practical uses (as opposed to its philosophical origins) have been seen as more humble, although no less important – see, for example, Hoggart’s vivid description of “old men who fill the reading rooms of the branch public libraries... [where] the newspapers stretch bleakly round the walls, heavily clamped and with the sports pages carefully pasted over, so as to discourage punters” (Hoggart, 1957: 69).

Neither characterisation is untrue or inaccurate – libraries have always been imbued with noble aspirations, just as they have always been (ab)used in ways which contradict those values by patrons just glad of a warm, free, non-judgemental public space in which to idly flick through a newspaper or quietly doze in a secluded corner.¹⁹ Indeed, it is precisely that quality which makes libraries ideal sites for meeting the social inclusion agenda outlined earlier; historically, the public library has been just as important as a social meeting point and refuge as it has been a cathedral of books.

It is from this perspective that the often competing ideologies within the library profession, and occasionally within policy circles, have battled for the

¹⁹ Chapter 6 will explain in greater depth how different groups can use a branch library in different ways, some of which are considered unsuitable by other groups and by staff.

‘hearts and minds’ of library users. The 1980s saw a conflict over the place of the service in the modern era where traditional public services were under threat or scaled-down to improve efficiency. In certain quarters, this led to suggestions that the public library network was unworthy of public finance because it “largely supplies free pulp fiction to those who could well afford to pay for it” (Adam Smith Institute, 1986: 42), and should therefore be replaced by a predominantly subscription-based service.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, there was growing support for Community Librarianship as the response to falling interest in the service, whereby “[t]he community library was seen as an agency of social change, and its services a way of redressing social and cultural inequalities” (Comedia, 1993: 36). Even here, however, there was disagreement over the direction this renewed service might take, with three schools of thought emerging – summarised by Black & Muddiman in *Understanding Community Librarianship* (1997) as the Mainstream/Welfarist approach, the Radical approach and the Responsive/Consumerist approach. The emergent consensus of the last twenty years has seen a combination of the Radical and Consumerist schools dominate policy, based on a political desire to address exclusion and inequalities through improved community involvement which has been accompanied by a more market-led desire to provide popular and largely leisure-based lending materials. The management of the service, meanwhile, is increasingly organised along similar lines, with techniques of performance indicators adopted from the private sector but done alongside a policy rhetoric acclaiming participative involvement of users and stakeholders.²⁰ The previous section has already outlined some of the contemporary policies where these new approaches are apparent, but it is worth drawing attention here to the philosophical battles which have informed those policies. These have also been discussed in the excellent account of the development of the service, *The Public Library in Britain, 1914-2000* (Black, 2000), which describes the moves towards a more marketised approach and the “techno-bureaucratic dimensions of professionalism” (Black, 2000: 150).

²⁰ Chapter 5 will explore these issues in greater depth.

This has not been without its problems. As Chapter 5 will discuss in greater detail, the move towards consumer-led book stock has been cited as a major problem for the service. Where users borrow leisure reading and light fiction, more of the same material is provided so that local authorities can achieve targets for lending statistics; this, in turn, has an effect on the other elements of stock and on perceptions of the service amongst users (see, for example, Black & Crann, 2002; McMenemy, 2007; Toyne & Usherwood, 2001).

It is this background which makes contemporary debates over social inclusion and the public library all the more pertinent. The positioning of the Community Library as an ‘agent of social change’ marked a forerunner of current drives to make public libraries community-focused and inclusive settings in which a variety of social policy ambitions can be met. Both policies seek to reconceptualise the branch library as user-orientated and relevant. Indeed, Newman (2007) has written of how ‘community’ is increasingly seen to be the antidote to public sector bureaucracy, not least within the library service.

If there has been an ideological shift within the library service within the last twenty years, it has been a subtle one – evolution rather than revolution – borrowing from the consumerist practices of the private sector to provide brighter and more attractive library spaces and training staff to be more responsive to the needs of users (Black, 2000; Melling & Little, 2002). The ideals of promoting self-improvement, freedom of information and social mobility have nevertheless also prevailed and remained at the heart of the service’s modern mission – and, indeed, ambitions to promote social mobility are not, of course, unique to the public library service.²¹ It is a theme, however, which dominates contemporary debates around libraries because of their particular role in providing services for users to develop new skills – a situation which has resulted in the service being described as “an institution which has consistently displayed liberal credentials of

²¹ Nor are they new ones within sociological discourse. Whyte’s (1993) seminal study of street-corner Boston made reference to the social significance of self-improvement: “Our society places a high value upon social mobility. According to tradition, the workingman starts in at the bottom and by means of intelligence and hard work climbs the ladder of success” (Whyte, 1993: 273). ‘Social mobility’ has since transcended from subjective workingman aspiration to stated policy ambition (HMG, 2009).

emancipation and inclusion” (Black, 2000: 145). The library service’s label of being the ‘street-corner university’ is not therefore without merit; even if, for many users, “it was something less lofty though equally valuable in its way – school, technical college, compendium, a window on to the artistic and literary world” (Luckham, 1978: 81). For the street-corner library user, particularly in working-class communities, the library therefore occupied a central role in providing access to knowledge; a role replicated elsewhere in society, as the next section will explain.

2.2.1: The demographics of the public library

Having outlined the policy and academic debates specifically around the public library service, I want to add a brief note on the main users of the service, in order to give an idea of the context in which this research was carried out. Specifically, I want to address issues of social class and age amongst library users because of the significance of these factors both historically and in dictating current patterns of use.

The public library has historically been seen as the cornerstone of working-class access to ‘culture’; Rose (2001) has considered at great length the emergence in Britain of the working-class autodidact, and the rise of those institutions which accompanied it. In particular, his chapter on Welsh miners’ institutes provides a relevant account of attitudes to reading and learning in a Welsh context which has a special resonance with this research.

The service has often suffered from accusations of a “post-war middle class bias” (Black & Muddiman, 1997: 32), but in recent years this has arguably become more blurred. Greenhalgh *et al* point to the complex composition of the service’s users and conclude that the public library “is a genuinely distributed cultural service” (1995: 41). Individual branches may well have disproportionately large numbers of middle-class or working-class users, but more often than not this is simply reflective of the social demographics of the area in question.

The facilities of a library branch, however, allow users to become socially mobile in unformalised ways, and this is reflected by patterns of library usage, which are frequently irregular: “[t]here are no iron laws of use and non-use, and few patterns of uninterrupted continuity” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 41). I would argue that this is both a major strength and a major weakness of the service – its informal nature allows users to pop into a local branch on a whim and borrow a book of particular relevance to them at that time, and they may not repeat the process for months, years or even at all. This flexibility, particularly with simplified procedures for registering as a library user, makes the service user-friendly, but by the same token has made it hard for staff to keep track of their irregular users and to tailor services to meet their needs.

A case in point has been the elusive ‘uninterrupted continuity’ referred to above. For many branches, users fall into a specific place on a ‘library life cycle’ where use is heavily related to age. Anecdotally, use is particularly associated with two principle groups – children and the elderly/retired. In the first instance, young children (and their parents) come to the branch for organised events such as story sessions or as part of co-ordinated government schemes such as Bookstart,²² as well as for informal instances of pleasure reading. In the second instance, the retired/elderly members of the community are often thought of as being the mainstay of any library’s ‘regulars’.

Hawkins, Morris & Sumison (2001) have disagreed with this analysis, stating that “[u]se by age group is... more even than is sometimes supposed... There is no overwhelming use by any age group and libraries are certainly not the near monopoly of the elderly” (2001: 260). Nevertheless, they still identify seven ‘ages’ of library use on which some generalisations can be made and which do correspond to the anecdotal patterns of use, as follows:

- 1) **Nursery:** Children of pre-school age have limited reading skills and picture books are important to stimulate the imagination...

²² The Bookstart scheme provides free books for children in all areas of the UK. It became fully funded by government in 2004, and the scheme involved a level of partnership with libraries whereby activities are organised in branches and parents/guardians are given help to choose books.

- 2) **Primary school:** Use increases steadily throughout the primary school stage, both for homework and for pleasure...
- 3) **Secondary school:** Use begins to fall off after the age of 11...
- 4) **Young adults (15-19):** Library use depends heavily on whether or not the individual is still in formal education...
- 5) **19-35 year olds:** ...These are not heavy library users...
- 6) **Mature adults (35-60):** ...Library use will depend on circumstance as well as inclination...
- 7) **Elderly people:** ...They read large quantities of fiction... They are less likely to have private transport and prefer to use community libraries.

(adapted from Hawkins *et al*, 2001: 261)

This typology still confirms the traditional patterns of use, and was broadly reflected by the data from this research. The article also emphasises some of the differences between branch and city-centre libraries in the types of users they attract. In this respect, at least, there is some truth to the anecdotal models of use – in smaller branch libraries (such as the one studied in this research), the users are more likely to be pursuing leisure interests; hence the dominance of elderly users and young children, for whom fiction and pleasure reading hold a strong appeal. By contrast, the city-centre library attracts a larger proportion of the young adults, 19-35 year-olds and mature adults typified above.

Critically, the life cycle topic highlights just how disparate library users, and their interests, can be, and how hard it is for library staff to identify any group(s) to target as potential new users. As the following section will now discuss, this is further complicated by a wide, and sometimes conflicting, set of expectations amongst users for what the library service should seek to provide.

2.3: Education vs leisure?: the future of the library service

I have already outlined those elements of government policy and academic literature which have staked a great deal on the library service carving out a niche for itself as a means to address inequality, particularly through linking libraries to programmes around social inclusion (see, for example, DCMS, 1999, 2001; Newman, 2007; Pateman, 1999; Williamson, 2000). Yet this also links to the much larger question of whether (and how) libraries should be reinvented for a modern audience. The debate runs much wider and deeper than the inclusion

issue, with many commentators making grim forecasts for the library service because of the rise of the internet as a repository for easily-accessible information and the popularity of cut-price high street bookstores as a source of entertainment reading. The question has been what the library service's modern role is for the public as a whole (as opposed to just those at the knife-edge of inclusion/exclusion). Frequently the focus has been on the twin roles of education and entertainment.

Amongst the most passionate and outspoken advocates of reform have been Leadbeater (2002) and Coates (2004) who have focused on the need for wholesale changes within the library network. Coates (a former Managing Director of the Waterstone's chain of book stores) has argued for much greater investment in book stock for the service if new users are to be attracted. In particular, he has made the case for a much more populist selection of reading material, arguing that the library service "has to compete with commercial operators [and] carry items which are popular with the general public" (Coates, 2004: 17). Leadbeater, meanwhile, argued for a simplification of the service's management to reduce the number of departments directing library policy, but also for a concerted effort to attract new users to reinvigorate the service: "libraries should launch an imaginative marketing drive into areas where people are least likely to visit libraries, read books or learn" (2002: 16).

This emphasis on marketing libraries and making them more consumer-focused has long been a demand of those within the library profession (Melling & Little, 2002; Usherwood, 1981; Wainwright, 1966), but there has been frequent disagreement over which direction it should take. In some circles it has been argued that "the word 'library' seems to have accreted such negative overtones" (Culture, Media & Sport Committee, 2005: 17), such are its connotations with a stereotypical, fusty, old-fashioned repository of books shrouded in acutely-observed silence and fierce, unwelcoming staff. This led to some libraries being rebranded as 'Ideas Stores' or 'Discovery Centres' to try and promote a more modern image for the public library. For critics, this linguistic upgrading has failed to paper over the cracks of a service in decline (Coates, 2008).

The backdrop to much of the debate over the service's future has been the role of Information Technology within the library network. It has also been the most conspicuous manifestation of the service changing – where once libraries were full of books, their space is now more shared between the written word and computer workstations. As branches get refurbished or redeveloped, more space is typically given over to IT provision, and the number of courses offered to teach users IT skills are being expanded.²³ This expansion has not always been popular, with some library traditionalists (both staff and users) suggesting that the increasing role of IT is demeaning the importance of books and substantially altering what the public library as an institution provides (Leadbeater, 2002, strongly criticised this cultural conservatism within elements of the service). It has also been suggested (Black, 2000) that in some quarters of the library profession, IT was welcomed as a way of 'propping up' the service and providing a degree of job security to "librarians appearing... as prime candidates for extinction as traditional work patterns... shattered" (Black, 2000: 156).

The developing role of IT has contributed significantly to the debate about where the future of the service lies – "to educate, to inform, or to provide leisure?" (Hayes & Morris, 2005: 138) by acting partly as a microcosm of the service as a whole. As later chapters will discuss, younger library patrons playing games on computers in branches are seen by some as 'illegitimate' users of the library, but equally the service often makes it hard for users to 'work' on computers for any length of time because of limits on usage.

This has contributed to a wider situation whereby it is now almost universally accepted that there is a crisis over what, in practical terms, is the future of the public library service. In the current climate, information is much more easily available through the internet, and leisure reading is increasingly easy to find cheaply thanks to the buying power of large supermarkets and the reduced overheads of internet sellers. From both ends of the education-leisure spectrum the library service is being squeezed by competition of one sort or another and is under pressure from within (and from users) to reinvent itself.

²³ The branch at Llancarreg observed in this study was no different; Chapter 7 will discuss in detail the importance and also the shortcomings of IT classes in the library.

Of course, this debate is not new,²⁴ and nor are the criticisms that the service is in some way ‘dumbing down’ to try and generate mass appeal. Rose (2001) writes an interesting account of the reading records from Welsh miners’ institutes, and illustrates the wide range of tastes which pervaded:

There were, then, intellectuals and Marxists among the Welsh colliers, but they were minorities concentrated in certain places and certain intervals in time... Though Welsh miners certainly had an enormous appetite for thrillers, Westerns, and tepid sex, they did not entirely ignore Charlotte Brontë. (Rose, 2001: 253/5)

This variety of tastes is no less true in the modern library – it would be crudely inaccurate to suggest that demand was wholly for cheap paperbacks, just as it would be untrue to suggest educational materials were in constant high demand. Nevertheless, criticisms remain that library shelves are dominated by Mills & Boon, to the detriment of more worthy or educationally beneficial tomes.²⁵ It has even been suggested that “[f]or many librarians, fiction is still the ghost at the banquet, the irreverent intruder into a more dignified gathering” (Comedia, 1993: 46); proof positive that “the Victorian literary prejudice against fiction” (Rose, 2001: 245) has remained into the modern day, at least in certain circles. In other quarters, however, the lending of light fiction and leisure reading has been cited as the library service’s main strength:

Recreation and culture do not ‘achieve’ anything in the same way that education, information and economic development can be seen to ‘achieve’ ends. It is, therefore, easy and common, for the two ‘non-achieving’ roles to be sacrificed at the expense of the ‘achieving’ ones. This is very dangerous for both the public library and the ‘public sphere’... Recreation is the Atlas on the shoulders of which the other roles of the public library rest. (Williamson, 2000: 184)

Light fiction shares a critical quality with IT provision in this respect – while both may be frowned upon by library purists and some (although by no means all)

²⁴ As long ago as 1919, the government was conscious of the need to strike a balance, stating that the library service “must satisfy the needs of the serious student; but it must also cater for that large class of people who are ‘general readers’, and those who go to books for recreation” (Third interim report of the Adult Education Committee, Ministry of Reconstruction)

²⁵ As Chapters 4 and 5 will discuss, there was some truth to this in Llanccarreg, where Mills & Boon novels represented a significant proportion of the branch’s stock.

library professionals, they are important in attracting users to the library and maintaining their interest. In this sense, they are the 'core business' of the library, even if the more culturally-highbrow elements of the provision are those of which the service is proudest.

Greenhalgh *et al* (1995) expand on this same point, suggesting that many of the criticisms of the modern library network are misplaced, not least because of their subjectivity. A large proportion of media attention on the service makes a demonstrably unequal comparison between the small, familiar branch library of the author's childhood with the bustling, cosmopolitan library of the modern city. Moreover, in making those comparisons, it is possible to lose sight of what they represent about society as a whole rather than just the library service. The critics, it is suggested "were expressing... hatred of the modern world... projecting this on to the changes that have happened in the natural development of the modern public library" (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 142). Fifteen years later, some elements of that analysis remain true. For example, a recent uncomplimentary *Guardian* article by Lynsey Hanley (2008) attacked the noise in the modern public library, where mobile phones and loud conversations reduce the opportunity for silent study and contemplation, without acknowledging that this has been a general trend to which libraries have been as subjected as any other public building. It is true that the "lost world of silence and furniture polish" (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 140) has been worn away by some policy measures which have sought to break down institutional barriers which have made libraries unappealing (DCMS, 1999), but it is also true that the library service cannot operate in a vacuum and has to reflect to some extent changes in society at large – whether it be an acceptance that mobile phone use is hard to curtail in public spaces, or the importance of the internet as a source of information.

The dichotomy between education and entertainment is rarely stated explicitly, least of all in policy documents which seek to strike a seemingly-impossible balance between the two, but is clearly a subject of some debate amongst users and front-line staff at ground level. The respondents to Black & Crann (2000; 2002) are just one example of this – on the one hand praising libraries as "a comfortable place to be with pleasant likeable people... social

centres for the elderly, places to meet and pass around books” (Black & Crann, 2002: 154) but at the same time expressing concern that libraries were becoming too much “like community information centres” (*ibid.*: 153) because of the advent of computers and the relaxation of rules.

The research reported on in this study does not try and reconcile those two conflicting positions; indeed, it makes explicit that the conflict is partly a historic one which is unlikely to ever be truly resolved. However, as the data in the later chapters demonstrates, the discord which the conflict has caused is deep-rooted, and is further complicated by the mass of influences on front-line services which makes coherent policy difficult to achieve. I have mentioned earlier the complex web of policy inputs whereby the DCMS is responsible for overall strategy (but not for funding) of libraries, whilst there is also a regional input at Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish level. Even at local authority level, there is often disagreement over where within their own structure the library service should fit. The result has been a situation where some local authorities place libraries under the auspices of the education department whilst others (probably the majority) classify libraries as a recreational service along with parks and leisure centres (see Davies, 2008).

That distinction may, on one level, seem an arbitrary one, but it in fact masks a fundamental underlying tension about the future of the service; one which has failed to be resolved by all the policy discourses and academic critiques. Ultimately, there are two different, opposing expectations of the service – whether amongst policy-makers, policy-enactors, policy-analysers or library users – whereby one set expect the primary function of the service to be that of education, and another expect it to be recreation.

The resultant situation, and that which this research sought to explore in greater detail, has been a complicated, incoherent, fragmented library system – a point which has been made strongly by two high-profile critics of the current policy agenda(s) for the service:

Faced with a multitude of policies and initiatives from their own council and central Government, each library authority must unpick the knot of priorities in order to operate a service for its customers. (Coates, 2004:

4)

...public libraries run many projects relating to social inclusion, learning, e-government and crime for government departments. What they lack is a sense of their own mission or of their place in a modern society (Leadbeater, 2002: 13)

Understanding this 'knot of priorities' and their effect on day-to-day services, and identifying what, at a local level, was seen to be 'the library's place in a modern society' were therefore key objectives of this study and are crucial to the library service as a whole.

2.4: Citizenship, learning, culture: a sociological context

In this final substantive section of the chapter, I want to move the focus slightly away from the public library and the policy around it, and instead aim to explore some of the wider issues at stake in the chapters which follow. In particular, I want to interrogate the themes of civic identity and citizenship, culture and informal learning. All three relate significantly to elements of the public library service and are discussed both implicitly and explicitly in the data from this research.

Raymond Williams argued that libraries should be "put at the centre of our community, because learning is the deepest meaning of the society we are trying to create" (Williams, 1978: 77), and in doing so recognised how people can draw strength, both intellectually and ideologically, from the potential that libraries offer. Libraries also fulfil a role as locations of civic engagement; both through being "at the hub of the community" and "[enabling] people to become more involved in the democratic process" (Brophy, 2007: 37). My intention in this section is to expand on these themes, starting by exploring issues in relation to culture and education and then moving on to civic expression.

The library's role in supporting education and learning is a complicated one. For many users, the library is an important resource for finding information about a range of subjects, particularly when the user wants to just 'dip in' to a topic. Being able to borrow a book, for free, can be an easy way to introduce

oneself to a new subject, or it can be a practical way to find a solution to a particular need or question. In this regard, the educational experience is a very broad one, far removed from any form of structured teaching, instruction or training. In a formal sense, of course, “education is the process by which society, through schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions, deliberately transmits its cultural heritage... from one generation to another” (Kneller, 1971: 20/1). For the library user curious about a given subject, however, that description cannot apply. The user may well not consider themselves to be a ‘learner’ in a strict sense, nor a receiver of a ‘cultural heritage’ through the learning they are doing. They are simply extending their knowledge and experience in a self-directed way.

It is here that informal learning proves to be a problematic notion, because its nature is imprecise, unique to the learner in question. At its widest interpretation, informal learning can be seen as:

...the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally informal education is unorganised, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning – including that of a highly ‘schooled’ person. (Coombs and Ahmed 1974: 8)

Informal, lifelong learning is not restricted to the workplace, the night-school or (for the modern era) the online education course, but incorporates a wide spectrum of influences. In all cases the key emphasis has been on the flexibility which informal education offers. The regularity with which library users indulge in this sort of learning is hard to establish – by its nature, informal learning is hard to quantify – but the data in later chapters show that it represents a significant part of the library’s daily routine (although, it should be stressed, not anything like the majority of book issues from an individual branch). However, this importance is often not reflected in general policy terms in relation to informal learning, and nor is there as great a focus in academic literature.

There is an abundance of literature on structured lifelong learning (eg, Elliott, 1999; Field, 2000; Gorard & Rees, 2002; Hodgson, 2000). However, the field of unstructured, informal, autodidactic learning has frequently been one which has been considered either through the lens of cultural studies or as a constituent part of lifelong learning as a whole. The role of informal learning as a distinct entity is therefore very much seen to still be evolving:

Informal learning has attracted some attention in the past, and is likely to receive more as policy makers and researchers increasingly focus on the distribution and application of tacit as well as codified knowledge, and on learning that is situated in the workplace and community settings... Yet this remains something of a black box, with few reliable indicators beyond the anecdotal. (Field & Schuller, 2000: 112-3)

As Field and Schuller point out, the central problem with informal learning is that, by its very nature, it is hard to measure and record (see Eraut, 2000). This sits unfavourably with a policy framework in which a growing importance is attached to statistical measurements of outputs and to the performance indicators and management models of the private sector (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Lewis & Surrender, 2004). Informal education has to operate in contrast to these “market-based, consumerist education policies” (Elliott, 1999: 131), and it is perhaps little wonder that whilst informal learning is acknowledged in policy terms, it is less frequently developed into anything concrete:

...whilst the government is enthusiastic of lifelong learning, it still does not acknowledge its responsibility to bring it about... There is little sense of leading, let alone expanding, opening out, fostering, nurturing, enlivening or celebrating learning and learners (Elliott, 1999: 127/8)

This “periodic genuflection in the direction of informal learning” (Coffield, 2000: 2) in policy circles has not damaged the fervour with which advocates of informal learning have sought to justify its importance (see, for example, Coffield, 2000; Hodgson, 2000). There have also been calls for “a re-examination [to] place lifelong training and education at the service of a global development strategy that is economically efficient, socially equitable, ecologically sustainable and politically democratic” (Field, 2000: 155).

This imbalance between the importance of lifelong learning amongst its

participants and its marginalisation within policy terms is not dissimilar from the “high public esteem and low political visibility” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 43) of the public library outlined earlier. Moreover, it is as part of this educational landscape that the public library service, along with museums and art galleries, plays a part as a centre for informal learning. By providing dedicated spaces for educational/cultural enrichment, and also through the provision of dedicated facilities to the self-motivated learner, it plays a pivotal role in offering a flexible service for learners who need and value that same flexibility.

The lack of a coherent policy framework for informal learning and the difficulty in measuring its output has not altered the fact that most people, at some stage in their adult life, will take part in activities or pursuits which are educational in one way or another. As a gateway to knowledge, the public library may often be someone’s first port of call when seeking to learn about a new topic. This learning may be irregular, infrequent, casual and unrecognised – but to the person doing it, it will have a meaning. The challenge for the public library service, and one of the elements on which this research focused, is what form(s) that learning takes and how it can best be assisted and supported.

It should already have become apparent that the demarcation between informal education and cultural provision is an extremely blurred one. The public library certainly has a role as a space for learning and education, however informal it may be, but to that wide interpretation we must also add conceptualisations of ‘culture’. Conceptualising what form that cultural provision takes, and how it relates to educational ideals is problematic. As later chapters will explore, the popular culture of the public library and the educational/cultural elements of traditional provision make for an uneasy tension within the service.

Criticisms of popular culture are not confined to disgruntled library users, and nor are they in any way a new phenomenon. The perceived shortcomings of mass culture have been a frequent target for cultural moralising by those who have seen the influence of cultural industries as undermining ‘authentic’ culture (Arendt, 1968; Rosenberg & White, 1963; Sontag, 2001). In one of the most important works on the subject, Richard Hoggart argued in *The Uses of Literacy*

(1957) that the effects of mass culture would be to destroy (or at least undermine) traditional notions of working-class culture. In particular, he criticised the “candy-floss world” of “novels of entertainment... the paperbacks which pour from publishing-houses few have ever heard of, which make ragged and gaudy the windows of the stationers, the new magazine-shops and the station bookstalls”²⁶ (Hoggart, 1957: 207). One group of writers above all have been singled out for particular contempt: “Mills & Boon romance writers who sit in cafés, watching the passing crowd, to gain inspiration for their next same-but-different story” (Hartley, 2003: 136). Some writers (such as Dixon, 1999) have argued that the immense popularity of Mills & Boon romance novels combined with their perceived lack of cultural value has unfairly made them a symbolic target for cultural debate. As Chapter 5 will discuss at greater length, Mills & Boon novels symbolise a clash between ‘access’ and ‘culture’ – whether books with seemingly little educational or cultural value can and should fulfil a role in attracting users to a public library.

This sometimes rather dismissive attitude towards the Mills & Boon genre is partly a shorthand for a wider set of criticisms; in Llancarreg, the Mills & Boon novels (principally read by the older female demographic of the library clientele) were not far removed in the cultural spectrum from the rows of Westerns and Military Stories which were popular amongst the older male demographic. Any condemnation of the lack of literary merit of the Mills & Boon novels could quite easily be levelled at all sorts of other books available in the average public library. In this respect, my use of Mills & Boon as a reference point in this discussion and elsewhere in the thesis is as an example to make a more general argument about the types of culture on display in the public library; I could quite easily have selected another popular genre.

Nevertheless, highlighting the Mills & Boon stable as an example is not without its problems, with the gendered nature of the genre being the most pressing. The social climate of the 1950s in which Hoggart was making his criticisms of Mills & Boon had its own set of cultural values and assumptions

²⁶ To that list one may well add libraries, as Chapters 5 and 8 will explore in greater depth.

which made the broadly female-orientated branch of light fiction easier to criticise than its male equivalent. Wilson (1980) has written in more detail about the partial and imperfect development of gender equality in the post-war decades, and highlighted both the negative effects of some literature in reinforcing gender stereotypes, as well as the benefits of particular female novelists in challenging such views. Gendered understandings and gendered usage of public libraries (and other similar public spaces) could be a focus for a thesis in its own right. Here, I acknowledge the implicitly gendered overtones in the different literary genres on show at Llancarreg, but concern myself more (both here and in the substantive chapters on the issue) with the cultural arguments at stake in relation to the light fiction novels at Llancarreg and other libraries.

It is not at all unreasonable to suggest that such books offer little by way of intrinsic artistic or literary value – but there is maybe some mileage in suggesting they have a cultural relevance in illustrating a *zeitgeist* and a wider reflection of society as a whole. The selling point of popular fiction is the familiarity; the fact that such books are “inherently formulaic, like a warm and relaxing or, conversely, artificially exciting bath; which can be endlessly repeated” (Hoggart, 1995: 113). Their straightforward and familiar plotlines, coupled with their easy readability, have made them a staple of the public library service and high-street chains alike. For this research, that familiarity and everyday-ness is an important part of their significance. Williams famously wrote that “culture is ordinary” (1958) and that traditional elitist notions of culture did not reflect the true cultural meaning which could be found in the familiar. By decrying the literary tendency “to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work” (Williams, 1958: 7), Williams and others set out the arguments for also considering culture through the lens of working-class culture (eg, Hoggart, 1957; Rose, 2001) and exploring the importance of the everyday (eg, Martin, 2003; Seigworth, 2000).

The previous chapter made reference to the importance of the everyday to this study, and this is equally true of how the research approached conceptualisations of culture. For the library users in this research, popular culture could be enjoyed without being endorsed as somehow worthy in itself – a point

which has been made elsewhere more generally:

Surely we can try to understand what pleasures are had from mass culture and how personal needs feed into these pleasures, without therefore jumping to the conclusion that they are ‘a good thing’? (Williamson, 1986: 14)

What did people do on a winter’s day or a Sunday afternoon of rain before TV – especially if they hadn’t much money? The short answer for millions of people then: ‘NOTHING MUCH’. They ‘messed about’ or did odd things (e.g. read pulp mags and Westerns, argued, titivated each other), which can hardly be said to be ‘worse’ than looking into polypact television. (Harrison, 1961: 207-8)

In the substantive chapters which follow, the question being asked about culture is not whether a given book or medium is worthy in a cultural sense, but simply why it has come to be a part of a public institution with cultural ambitions, and how, by whom and how frequently it is used.

The analysis will seek to identify and explore this ‘middle ground’ of culture without resorting to either extreme of the ‘high culture / popular culture’ continuum; the temptation is to view the everyday culture of the library either as the place where the “gullible masses are lured into reactionary attitudes by the drugs of mass culture” (Williamson, 1986: 15) or as “one of the sites where this struggle for and against culture of the powerful is engaged” (Hall, 1981: 239). For a discipline so firmly enmeshed in the everyday, it is at times hard to connect either extreme of cultural studies with the reality of culture at an everyday level. As later chapters will go on to discuss, the everyday elements of popular culture are not devoured with a political fervour and nor are they passively consumed by a docile public unable to resist them. Popular culture in this sense is “valuable in its own right and not a ‘shadow phenomenon’ or simply a vehicle for ideological mystification” (Jenks, 1993: 157). To some, this argument equates to the worst excesses of cultural relativism – for example, Furedi (2004) condemns what he perceives as a ‘dumbing down’ of society, whilst Hoggart (1995) singled out contemporary cultural institutions and the decline of religion’s influence in the society as being responsible for declining cultural standards.

At an everyday level, however, such criticisms often fail to reflect the

uniquely difficult role that some institutions face in identifying a balance between culture that is sufficiently popular for the public but also sufficiently worthy for critics. This is as true of the library service as anywhere else. As Chapter 5 will explain in more detail, where pressure exists to improve access and increase the number of book loans, decisions are likely to be taken to stock more of whatever material is deemed popular, regardless of its cultural value (Black & Crann, 2002; Black & Muddiman, 1997; McMenemy, 2007; Toyne & Usherwood, 2001). Thus, a service which exists ostensibly to provide educational, social and cultural opportunity runs the risk of undermining its own ethos because of its aims to make its operation more user-friendly and consumer-orientated – a theory which later chapters will investigate in much greater depth.

As the previous section explained, the difficulty for the library service is catering for vastly differing needs. Just as some users will want educational material, but often even then infrequently and in unstructured ways, so too the library's cultural output is often the subject of differing demands, differing tastes and is often experienced in different ways. The classic criticism of popular material, whereby "[p]op culture was seen as the opposite, indeed the nemesis, of culture itself" (Hartley, 2003: 34), is still occasionally put forward within modern cultural institutions, but it is further complicated by the need for libraries to be popular and to prove through their lending records that their offerings are used. When this happens, it creates a cycle which has the natural effect of 'squeezing out' material which could be considered classic or high culture.

Having outlined some of the issues at stake in relation to informal education and culture, I now intend to turn attention towards citizenship and civic engagement as another important element of library provision. The public library has long been seen as having a role to play as a centre of civic expression (eg, Joyce, 2003; Newman, 2007; Williams, 1978), but extrapolating exactly what this means in terms of front-line services and front-line library use is a little more complicated. By way of an introduction, the following short fieldnote extract serves as a short illustration of how these notions are manifested in the everyday

environment of the public branch library:²⁷

I am sat in the branch at Llancarreg in my usual spot at the work table in the middle of the branch, on what is a fresh but rather cold winter morning in the area. Today has been unusually busy, with quite a few users coming into the branch to borrow some reading material ahead of the forthcoming Easter Bank Holiday weekend.

The branch has been alive with conversation, not least amongst the large numbers of retired regulars who have come to the branch to catch up on local gossip as well as to borrow reading material. This is one of the frequent occurrences in the branch – it is not unusual for five or ten of the area's older residents to meet in the branch either through accident or design and spend some time chatting, exchanging news, swapping jokes and occasionally also talking about books and activities in the branch which they have enjoyed and want to recommend to others. This morning is no different, with a couple of regulars sprawled on the sofa by the coffee table just across from me, and three women stand by the Mills & Boon rack where the sun coming through the large windows at one end of the library provides some much-needed warmth to the branch.

Today, the main topic of discussion is an application from a nearby pub for a late license. The pub in question, the Prince of Wales, is located just a few minutes walk from the library, and has the reputation of being the least salubrious of Llancarreg's drinking holes, and is frequently described as a 'rough pub' by those who know the area well. The application for it to open until the early hours is met by some dismay amongst the library regulars, many of whom live within a short distance of the pub and express concern about drinkers congregating on the pavements after closing time, urinating into front gardens and shouting to one another – all of which are events which happen currently, according to the anecdotes being exchanged this morning.

Amongst those participating in the discussion is Reg, the most vocal and most well-known of the library regulars, who is rarely timid or hesitant in expressing an opinion on a local issue such as this. Indeed, Reg is the

²⁷ I am aware that the use of a fieldnote at this point within a doctoral thesis is unconventional, and that such a fieldnote would not normally feature until after the chapter explaining and justifying the methods employed for data collection. However, my intention in this section is to explore and develop issues around citizenship and civic engagement in specific relation to the library service, and I believe the best way to begin that discussion is with a clear, practical example of where and how these themes coalesce in a library setting. On a practical note, I should add that in the following chapters, ethnographic material and reported speech or conversation will appear in twelve-point Gill Sans MT font, like this:

Ethnographic material and reported speech or conversation appears in indented paragraphs in twelve-point Gill Sans MT font.

man around whom most of the informal meet-ups of the older regulars are organised, such is his status within the branch and the local community.

On this issue, his concern is perhaps understandable. His own house is barely a hundred yards away from the Prince of Wales, and he already complains regularly to his fellow library regulars about noise from the karaoke nights and loud shouting at kicking-out time on a weekend. Since Monday, when he first learned of the application and began to disseminate information amongst his 'gang' in the branch, Reg has got up a petition against the application. He has been slowly canvassing signatures for in the Post Office queue and some of the local shops, and today he is back at the library to meet up with other members of the group to persuade them to add their names to the petition. Most of the regulars present do sign the petition (possibly just for the sake of a quiet life), although one other regular – Ernest – politely refuses because he occasionally drinks at the pub and doesn't want to upset the landlord, with whom he is on friendly terms.

Presently, Reg asks Mark (one of the library assistants for the branch, who is working on his own this afternoon) whether he can put a copy of the petition on the issue desk at the front of the branch. From this position, it would be clearly visible to library users and would allow people to sign it when they come into the branch. As a reasonably prominent local facility, and one which is geographically closely-situated to the pub in question, the library is in this sense an ideal location for the petition.

Mark is initially reluctant, arguing that the library shouldn't really have a view one way or the other and that having the petition in the branch might be seen as an endorsement of the campaign. Eventually, however, he agrees to let the petition stay in the branch for a couple of days (partly, one suspects, to get Reg to go away). He does, however, add the proviso that the petition can only remain if Clarrie (the head librarian for the branch) doesn't mind. Once Reg has gone back to join his friends, Mark discreetly rings Clarrie to ask her view (she's in the other nearby branch which she also manages) and find that she has no objection, so he leaves the petition on the issue desk.

The petition actually stays in the branch for another week, gathering a dozen or so signatures, before Reg takes it away to submit to the Council.

In a very small way, the fieldnote about the petition shows how a branch library can be a place for civic engagement in a localised, everyday way. In the first instance, the library is a place where some residents can meet and discuss issues of local significance, sharing news, formulating opinions and making collective

decisions about how they view a given matter. It then also provides a focal point where that engagement on an issue can be centred – providing a physical environment of a recognised local landmark, open to all, in which this engagement can be expressed. In that sense, the role of the library as a place where users can ‘do citizenship’ in practical ways is established and accepted.

What is especially interesting in the fieldnote above is the clash between the aspiration for the branch to promote citizenship versus its ideological ambition to be “regarded as democratic, non-partisan, above sectional interests” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 51). In this instance, Mark had to make a judgement about whether displaying a petition against a licensing application would compromise the library’s independence. In the event, the judgement was made that the importance of providing a place for civic interaction took primacy, and that to not have done so would have represented a failure on the part of the branch to reflect and represent the views of its users (or, at the very least, the vocal members who made up the branch’s regulars and who were asking for the petition to be hosted in the library).

The fieldnote is just one of many similar examples of the branch at Llanccarreg being a place for civic expression and civic engagement amongst the users (and particularly the regulars amongst Reg’s gang). Self-evidently, the public library is an institution which draws on ideals around civic engagement, community, participation and the liberal public sphere. Indeed, as a cornerstone of the liberal public sphere (Newman, 2007; Williams, 1978), the library has a special place in conceptualisations of what it means to be ‘a citizen’:

The library created the liberal citizen in large measure through the fostering of self-help and self-culture, both of which involved self-knowledge... Self-help was not only individual... but also collective and communal, so that knowing one’s society was a prerequisite for knowing oneself. (Joyce, 2003: 130)

The language used here – ‘self-help’, ‘self-culture’, ‘self-knowledge’ – emphasises what this section has already outlined; namely that issues around informal education, culture and civic engagement are absolutely central to the library service’s role. Moreover, the quote also highlights that these themes are

illustrative and supportive of modern conceptualisations of citizenship. The library has a set of ambitions beyond its superficial responsibility to provide books and learning facilities, in this instance by playing “an instrumental role in the strengthening of civil society through building social capital” (Byrne, 2004: 12). It has also been suggested that:

...libraries support democracy... by creating ‘community spaces’ in which community members can learn, imagine and discover. They enable citizens to query matters of public moment, students to inquire, and all to pursue their interests. (Byrne, 2004: 15)

The library service is not alone in fulfilling this role, but crucially, it provides a physical space, open to all, in which it can happen.

Crick wrote that “[p]olitics are the public actions of free men (*sic*). Freedom is the privacy of men from public actions” (Crick, 1964: 18). This construction of the political world is not inconsistent with notions around citizenship, emphasising participation, civil/political rights and the responsibilities of citizens to their state. Throughout this study, the term ‘citizenship’ is used to reflect these public actions and public expressions,²⁸ as well as to describe a more traditional idea of the political and social rights as outlined by Marshall:

By the social element [of citizenship] I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in society. (Marshall, 1950: 11)

To this, we can compare the definition of an ‘active’ citizen as being “a dynamic individual who was self-reliant, responsible for his or her own actions, and yet possessed a sense of civic virtue and pride in both country and local community” (Faulks, 1998: 128). In doing so, it becomes apparent that the very notions of ‘citizenship’, ‘active’, ‘passive’ and ‘civic right/duties’ are complicated ideological markers rather than simple descriptive terms. This is further complicated by the extent to which conceptualisations of citizenship are gendered (see, for example, Lister, 1997). As Walby (1994) points out, Marshall’s widely-

²⁸ Chapter 3 will explain the methodological importance and methodological obstacles of observing ‘the public’; here, however, it is worth noting the closely-intertwined nature of ideals around civic/political expression and the public arena.

adopted model of citizenship has shortcomings in relation to gender – women in Britain before 1928 did not have liberty of the person, whilst married women lacked the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts and the right to justice, and political citizenship in the sense of the right to vote was also only granted in stages up until 1928. This same point is also reflected in the analysis of Titmuss (1963) in his description of the gradual rate at which women were recognised as citizens within the British welfare state. Whilst Marshall's conceptualisation reflects the state of citizenship and civic engagement as encountered in this study, the backdrop of the gendered nature of citizenship and the fight for equality of citizen status is implicitly acknowledged within the chapters that follow. As with the earlier discussion on gender and culture, citizenship and gender is a topic which could occupy a thesis in its own right; my intention instead is to apply an gendered lens where appropriate to the issues at stake in this research, and to highlight some of the specific issues arising from the data where further study could be productive and interesting.

In one sense, of course, the library service promotes the ideal of individuals making the most of their potential through self-improvement, and communities becoming empowered through learning (see Williamson, 2000). It does therefore provide and support a space for active citizenship and the fostering of democratic debate and participation (Webster, 1995). Even here though, it is hard to argue that those who use the service simply as a place to borrow and return books are not civically engaged; the very fact that they enter the public arena of the library is in itself an act of citizenship:

Using a public service is not just a consumer experience. Each engagement with a public service should deepen a sense of civic attachment and underpin a sense of citizenship: why it matters to be part of a democratic society. (Leadbeater, 2004: 53/4)

This symbiotic relationship between public state and community (see also Cooper, 1998; Newman, 2005) can create an environment in which a sense of civic interaction can be fostered, even through the most simple of interfaces. For the library service, the fact that a branch exists, is open to all, and is a place where citizens can engage in a variety of services for free is evidence of a citizen-centred service.

Thus, the physical presence of a public institution still offers a location in which citizenship and civic interactions can take place. The sense of belonging is more than just an abstract sense of ‘community’ or ‘shared values’ – it is often inextricably linked with a group’s link to, or organisation around, a tangible place or space:

...as the material world grows, ordinary people are experiencing failure in new forms... [and] the value of place has thereby increased. The sense of place is based on the need to belong not to ‘society’ in the abstract, but to somewhere in particular; in satisfying that need, people develop commitment and loyalty. (Sennett, 1999: 14/15)

Gieryn (2000) has written about the importance of physical spaces in which citizenship, civic engagement and social participation can occur – particularly in an age where increased importance is attached to virtual spaces for networking. These virtual spaces, he argues, lack both the personal contact and tangibility which makes the physical space so important to society. Williams (1978) wrote more specifically about the role of the library service in providing that space as a focus of a community, in keeping with the aspirations of the public sphere as a whole (both essays will be referred to in greater detail in the analysis in Chapters 6 and 8).

It is for this reason that the physical aspect of the liberal public sphere – the buildings and institutions which constitute it – play such a key part in fulfilling a citizenship role. They provide a space in which free association can take place and communal ties can be forged, even for those who outside their walls might be considered excluded or deprived.

What this section has demonstrated is the ways in which much larger debates – around informal education, around culture, around engagement – intertwine with more conventional conceptions of the purpose of a public library. The substantive chapters which follow will explore these themes, often implicitly, to convey how these ideas are manifested at street level on an everyday basis.

2.5: Conclusions

This chapter has covered a lot of ground by outlining the policy discourses, academic critiques and theoretical themes which surround the public library service. In doing so, it has provided some context to the following chapters, in which the everyday actions of staff and users of a branch public library can be looked at against the backdrop of policy aspirations and theoretical debates.

Later chapters will explore relevant literatures in greater depth in specific relation to fieldnote data. For example, policy aspirations towards citizenship and ideological arguments about how citizenship should be expressed will be set alongside fieldnote extracts which show street-level manifestations of civic interaction and community engagement. In other chapters, specific literatures will be referred to where relevant (such as literatures around audit culture in relation to how libraries promote and evaluate different types of 'culture').

What this chapter has demonstrated is that the library service is fraught with debate and argument both about its current framework and about its future role. As a service, it is well-used and well-regarded by its patrons, but it lacks the political weight of other public services. It also suffers from a complex structure, whereby local authorities are charged with day-to-day running and funding, but national departments (and regional agencies in some cases) have a say over structural reform and policy objectives despite not always providing commensurate resources for carrying them out. When reforms are suggested, they are often met with hostility by those expecting a traditional service; equally, however, when they are avoided there are grim predictions about a dying service which has not kept pace with a changing modern world.

Away from those practical concerns, theoretical battles within the service also add to the public library's complexity. The backdrop of ideological crusades within the service during the 1980s may have been largely forgotten, but contemporary debates continue to centre around where the future of the service lies. The revolutionary effect of IT provision, for example, has significantly changed the emphasis of the library service but has elicited strong support in some quarters and scepticism in others.

Finally, the service has always been the subject of differing expectations around culture, education and civic engagement. There are those who see the provision of popular culture in libraries as an unwelcome new phenomenon, and there are others who point to the service's historical role in providing works to suit all tastes. By the same token, the library's role in providing resources for informal education is problematic when such education can be hard to measure in terms of statistical outputs. As a place for civic interaction, meanwhile, the library's physical space in many communities makes it ideally-located as a tool for citizenship – but tying down what that means at an everyday level is often avoided in policy literature.

It is this series of debates which form the basis of the research questions outlined earlier and is the focus of the data in the later chapters. Having provided the background and context to the research, the next chapter will explain and summarise the methodological approaches taken in the data collection.

3. Methods, data and field relations

This chapter provides a description of the ways in which the research was conducted, and the methodological decisions that were taken in the course of data collection and analysis. The chapter begins with an exploration and justification of ethnographic methods generally, with specific reference to the ways in which ethnography provides an appropriate methodological framework with which to study the everyday social arena. This is followed by a section locating this ethnography in relation to other work on similar subjects and in the same geographic area of South Wales. The chapter then moves on to a consideration of data collection, strategies and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes by offering some critical reflections on the methods chosen and the ways in which they were applied during the research, as well as exploring issues around representation and ‘voice’ in qualitative research.

3.1: Ethnography as a research method for the everyday

As a study of everyday life in a familiar social setting, this research project employed ethnographic research methods as the most appropriate means of data collection. The precise methods and mechanics of the data collection will be explained and justified later in the chapter; here, my intention is to provide some background context and justification for the selection of this approach.

Goffman wrote that the “rules of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theatres, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tells us a great deal about its most diffuse forms of social organisation” (1963: 4). Those gathering places may appear prosaic at first glance – the daily interactions of the setting can be viewed as monotonous and routine, evocative of a particular construction of a humdrum, everyday existence in which “nothing happens, or rather the same thing always happens, which amounts, day after day, to nothing” (Ehrenreich, 2002: 186).

Yet as Chapter 1 discussed, everyday life can also be interpreted in a much more positive light. The everyday social spaces of which Goffman wrote – the street, the park, the restaurant (a list to which the public library is not an incongruous addition) – have a social meaning for those within them, and it is this meaning which merits scrutiny. It is here where ethnography can be cited as the most appropriate, indeed only, means by which to adequately undertake that scrutiny.

For one thing, the public nature of these research settings requires a flexible research method, capable of adapting to the ever-changing situations of the research site. The public accessibility of ‘the street’ (Duneier, 1999; Hannerz, 1969; Liebow, 1967; Whyte, 1993), whether in a literal sense or not, requires a research technique which is capable of tapping in to the complex and changing social tapestry of a busy environment. While this has more frequently been seen as particular to urban ethnography, there is no obvious reason for that exclusivity. This research was not carried out within an urban environment, but the public library setting (as an extension of the streetcorner) can still be said to offer its own idiosyncratic value to those who populate it. The streetcorner can be depicted as “a sanctuary for those who can no longer endure the experience or prospect of failure” (Liebow, 1967: 214) – but the same can also be said, in an oblique way, of the public library which offers a calm, removed refuge from the outside world. By using ethnography to observe and collect data about this sort of research site, it becomes possible to understand the complex social web and social values of the setting, and to adapt the research technique to those implicit complexities. Furthermore, these public settings are amenable to observation in ways that other settings (executive boardrooms, policy briefings) are not; the public nature of the research site thus makes it practically as well as intellectually attractive as a space for data collection.

This research positions itself as a modest contribution to detailed, qualitative, ethnographic research of everyday sites. Whilst acknowledging that the Chicago School ethnographers cannot be grouped together into a holistic

entity,²⁹ this study fits within the common ground of conducting research in the form of “an extended empirical inquiry into the nature of social bonding in the modern, fragmented, city” (Savage & Warde, 1993: 13). More specifically, this research positions itself alongside particular studies which have moved slightly away from the streetcorner and into more distinctive social settings. For example, the café studied by Duneier (1992) was a setting which was both public and also personal – ostensibly open to all, but at the same time dominated by some individuals more than others. Like a public library, it was frequented by particular groups of regulars, resulting in a distinctive type of social action which could reasonably be expected of any other similar environment. In such a setting, the status of those regular users becomes more pronounced; their place in the social fabric elevates them, but so too does their ability to shape and influence the social rules of the space.

It is this idea of social values and rules which is fundamental to how we investigate and represent the everyday. Spaces are shaped by the everyday social customs and norms of those who populate and use them, with some groups dictating those norms and others conforming to them. As Goffman noted, “[t]he rule of behaviour that seems to be common to all situations and exclusive to them is the rule obliging participants to ‘fit in’” (1963: 11). Arguably, nowhere is this desire to ‘fit in’ more apparent than the everyday life experienced by residents of suburbia – as Chapter 1 explored, the suburb’s social and moral order (Baumgartner, 1988) can be largely attributed to established, accepted and understood modes of behaviour. Ethnography allows us to unearth and unpick these social rules, not by viewing them in sanitised isolation, but by directly engaging with the lived realities in which they occur and are played out:

Fieldwork asks the researcher, as far as possible, to share firsthand the environment, problems, background, language, rituals and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people. The belief is that by means of such sharing, a rich, concrete, complex, and hence truthful account of the social world being studied is possible. (Van Maanen, 1988: 3)

²⁹ Deegan (2001) has written in more detail about the impossibility of drawing unifying conclusions from such a disparate group of writings.

This sharing of the research site milieu, and through it the grounded understanding of the social and cultural values of the communities under study, is my justification for the use of ethnographic methods. For the familiar, everyday social surroundings of Llancarreg, the holistic nature of ethnography allowed me the greatest opportunity to explore and understand the setting as fully as possible.

It is this ethnographic lineage which forms the primary influence behind this research, and it underlines why ethnography is the most appropriate approach to analyse an everyday public social setting. It is true to say that “[t]oo often the history of ethnography is treated in rigid disciplinary and developmental frames... Its various manifestations have always been marked by diversity” (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, 2001: 4). However, this diversity is an inherent strength of the discipline; ethnography is a multi-faceted approach which offers flexibility and choice to the researcher. Whilst the practice of sociology has evolved considerably over time, its purpose – when reduced to its most basic components – remains reassuringly constant. The practice of studying society as a participant-observer allows us to gain an understanding of human motivations and behaviour through scrutinising first-hand the everyday, mundane events which make up the majority of social life and experiencing it for ourselves. As Malinowski argued:

The Ethnographer has in the field... the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities of tribal life; all that is permanent and fixed; of giving an anatomy of their culture, of depicting their constitution and society. But these things, though crystallised and set, are nowhere formulated. There is no written or explicitly expressed code of laws, and their whole tribal tradition, the whole structure of their society, are embodied in the most elusive of all materials: the human being.
(Malinowski, 1922: 11, original emphasis)

While the focus and language of the discipline may have changed (from discourses about ‘tribes’ to the more subtle differences between communities, for example), the essential challenge remains broadly the same – seeking to gain an understanding of human behaviour, customs and motivations through becoming part of the society, or social process, or setting under study. Only then can the familiarities of everyday life be made unfamiliar, and analysed to provide a meaningful insight into the social world.

3.2: Locating this ethnography

Contemporary ethnographic practice has been noted as being diverse and varied (Atkinson *et al*, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hammersley, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As Fine (2003) puts it in his discussion of contemporary ethnography:

Today ethnography has something of the character of Baskin-Robbins 31 ice-cream flavours, and, in the process, some of the consensus of the standards and boundaries of ethnography, both within and outside of sociology, and anthropology as well, has been lost (Fine, 2003: 42)

This section situates this study within ethnographic practice, highlighting some of the reference point that were drawn upon to contextualize the methods and approach.

The study draws, to an extent at least on an understanding of a ‘peopled ethnography’ (Fine, 2003). This conceptualisation is a contrast to more traditional realist ethnographies in which “a single author typically narrates the realist tale in a dispassionate, third-person voice... [resulting in] an author-proclaimed description and something of an explanation for a certain specific, bounded, observed (or nearly-observed) cultural practices” (Van Maanen, 1988: 45). The concept of a peopled ethnography can provide a more complex and nuanced approach to the process of social research. Fine (2003) identifies seven ‘pillars’ of peopled ethnography, namely:

- 1) It should be theoretical
- 2) It should build on other ethnographies and research studies
- 3) It should examine interacting small groups
- 4) It should rely on multiple research sites
- 5) It should be based on extensive observation
- 6) It should be richly ethnographic
- 7) It should distance researcher and researched

This study drew on this conceptualisation, particularly in relation to the

theoretical ambitions of peopled ethnography, starting by looking at ‘what’ happens, then ‘how’ and finally ‘why’ (Katz, 2001), and also the aim of building on previous research and adding (and extending) academic knowledge.

This research has focused on discrete groups (the staff and users of a branch library) in a public space. Fine himself is sceptical of research on behaviour in public spaces because of a belief that interactions in such spaces do not demonstrate ongoing and lasting relationships (see also Lofland, 1973). I hope that the following chapters will paint a rather different picture and go some way towards making a case for researching small groups and communities in public settings as part of peopled ethnographic research. Indeed, Fine’s own work on small groups (eg, Fine 1983, 1987, 1996) suggests that the micro-sociological dynamics and interactions of small groups can be seen as “the laboratory for the examination of natural dynamics” (Fine, 2003: 53), and I hope that the analysis of my research also manages to extrapolate wider themes from discussions of small-scale interactions.

Brown-Saracino, Thurk & Fine (2008) acknowledge the not all seven pillars necessarily have to be present in peopled ethnographies, and indeed I did not follow through on calls for multi-site ethnography. Instead, they suggest that such studies should be supported by several of those pillars. In is in this spirit that the project should be judged.

The study is also, amongst other things, a study of a workplace, and in that sense sits within ethnographic studies of workplace settings. In some ways, the most obvious reference points are specifically the “dwindling number of qualitative – particularly ethnographic – studies of work” (Fincham, 2009: 1020), such as Bone’s (2006) account of call centres and door-to-door sales, Flett’s (1979) account of council housing officers, or Sanders’ (2006) ethnography of prostitution. The subject-matter of such studies is distant from the focus of this work, but there is nevertheless some commonality. The range of issues touched on, both implicitly and explicitly, covers a wide range of topics – the discussions of the levels of discretion and autonomy afforded to front-line workers (Gallie, Felstead & Green, 2004), the authority of public sector officials and their role(s)

in service delivery (Lipsky, 1980), the different effects of working in small and large organisations (Kalleberg & Van Buren, 1996; Scase, 2004; Tsai, Sengupta & Edwards, 2007), workplace conflict (Friedman, Tidd, Currall & Tsai, 2000; Schieman & Reid, 2008; Vallas, 2003) and gender in the workplace (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Crompton & Harris, 1998; Ross & Wright, 1998). Thus, the roots of the workplace elements of this research resonate with ethnographic accounts of ordinary work and with wider writings about workplace relationships. There is also a considerable debt not just to the work of Lipsky on public sector officials (a theme which will be discussed in much greater detail in later chapters), but also to the work of Handy (1993, 1994) on the nature of organisations. In particular, his comments on the fragility of organisations have a particular resonance: “Most organisations are not designed, they grow... But not all organisations adapt equally well to the environment within which they grow. Many, like the dinosaur of great size but little brain, remain unchanged in a changing world” (Handy, 1993: 253). That quote in particular reverberates around some of the later chapters and invites several questions about some of the aspects of the setting under study here.

The research was also a study within a particular regional setting. Indeed, as Chapter 2 made clear, the Welsh setting raised specific issues around devolved policy-making and the nuanced nature of different policy inputs at different levels of government. Whilst the research is positioned more as a study in Wales rather than a study of Wales, the research still fits in to a wider set of sociological work in the south Wales region, for example ethnographic work undertaken, over several decades by scholars in Swansea and Cardiff.

Other writers have outlined the long and distinguished tradition of ethnographic writing in Cardiff (see in particular Delamont, Atkinson, Coffey & Burgess, 2001). This has encompassed both writings about methods (eg, Atkinson *et al*, 2001; Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont 2003; Coffey, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and ethnographic accounts. Many of the latter have been of occupational settings (Bunton, 1986; Coffey, 1993; Salisbury, 1994) or educational settings (eg, Renold, 1999) or medical settings (eg, Atkinson, 1995) or social work settings (Scourfield, 1999; Wincup, 1997). My aim in carrying out

this research was to use this ethnographic lineage as a useful set of reference points, and to approach fieldwork with a research design which was able to adapt both practically and theoretically to the research site and its challenges, in common with the ethos of the collection of ethnographic work at Cardiff.

In contrast to the emphases of the Cardiff school, the Swansea ‘school’ (see, for example, Davies & Jones, 2003; Harris, 1990) has focused more on the idea of (Welsh) community. In that sense, it also shares a great deal of common ground with this research. Amongst the more prominent Swansea work on community are studies on families (eg, Bell, 1968, 1990; Leonard, 1990; Rosser and Harris, 1965), the effects of economic decline on communities (Morris, 1984, 1985), issues around youth unemployment (Hutson & Jenkins, 1987, 1989) and farming (Hutson, 1990, 2003). Ethnographic work emerging from Swansea has focused on “issues which concern a large number of people and directly affect their everyday lives and their future” (Williams, 1990: 10). The everyday-ness of social life is clearly a key element of this study, but so too is the ambition to explore social issues in a community setting and consider how the interactions and relations in a small social setting are emblematic of wider social life as a whole. This work therefore resonates with some of the research on communities in Wales, particularly those of discrete communities/institutions within particular locations, displaying their own characteristic and relationships (eg, Jones, 2003, on the rugby team in a former mining village, or Murphy, 2003, on the battle of a group of residents to save their 27 homes from the hands of a property developer).

This study draws on these two different ‘schools’, exhibiting some of the tenets of each but without consciously striving to ‘fit’ into either. As an ethnography of a workplace, it corresponds to elements of the Cardiff tradition (Bunton, 1986; Carter, 1995; Coffey, 1993; Pithouse, 1984; Salisbury, 1994), but it also focuses heavily on community, in common with some of the Swansea works mentioned above. It also looks at some elements which are not common to either school – one example would be the exploration of a leisure space, where the works of Deem (1986), Dumazedier (1967, 1974), Henry (2001), Parker (1976, 1983) and Sparkes (1992) have been significant; equally of interest has been work on the relationship between types of leisure use and the life cycle (eg,

Abrams, 1995, Rapoport & Rapoport, 1995). Finally, of course, the emphasis of this study on a suburban community complements existing studies of rural Welsh settings (eg, Hutson, 1990, 2003) and urban Welsh settings (eg, O'Neill, 2003). In this respect, the central ambition of this research is not simply to follow on from the established schools of social research in south Wales, but to take up the challenge of Day (1979, 2002) of acknowledging that there is more than one Wales, and all of its manifestations reveal something different.

3.3: Fieldwork and methodological decisions

This section outlines the research undertaken, starting with an explanation of the selection of the research setting and a consideration of the benefits and shortcomings of the bounded research site, before moving on to outline and describe the technicalities of the methods used. I will then move on to explain how research relations and ethical considerations were managed.

3.3.1: Sampling, access and generalisability

Earlier chapters have already explored the significance of everyday, suburban settings for qualitative sociology, and the desire for such a site was what led me ultimately to Llancarreg branch library. While central (urban) libraries are often the showcases for any given local authority's library services because of their more prominent locations, branch libraries in suburbs and rural areas far outnumber their city-centre counterparts. Despite this, however, there seems to be little differentiation between these different types of libraries, either in government literature (CyMAL, 2008a, 2008b; DCMS, 1999, 2001, 2003) or in academic discourse (Brophy, 2007; Coates, 2004; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; Leadbeater, 2002). Suburban locations have a complex set of community values based heavily on widely-understood and widely-accepted notions of social order (Baumgartner, 1988; Silverstone, 1996; Richards, 1973). This research was aimed at exploring that everyday culture through unearthing a library community which itself embodied the same everyday, prosaic values. As with many ethnographies (Whyte 1993; Hannerz, 1969; Duneier, 1999), the aim was to get to the ordinary, mundane elements of social life.

The main research site for the study therefore had to be a branch library in a suburban location which, as far as possible, could be representative of the library service at large by exhibiting facilities and resources which could be described as broadly typical of branch libraries. Several criteria were used to identify the most appropriate branch for study. For purely practical reasons, anywhere more than an hour's drive away was rejected so I could make the regular commute to the branch. This still left over forty libraries from which to choose. Those libraries with very limited opening times were excluded because of the impracticability of conducting in-depth research on libraries which were not open for at least four days a week. I also rejected branches which did not offer key services such as IT facilities, children's areas or storytime sessions (the "usual features" of a typical library – Hayes & Morris, 2005: 132).

From here, the process of selection became more subjective; I visited the remaining branches to try and gauge as best I could their appropriateness for study. Not all, for example, were set out in such a way as to make them ideal for research purposes – some were very compact in their design or were located within other buildings such as leisure centres which made them somewhat unrepresentative of the majority of branch libraries. Furthermore, not all of the locations of the libraries were ideal for a study about a suburban setting – some were either too rural in their surroundings or were in areas more akin to small market towns than city/town suburbs.

Ultimately, the choice of Llancarreg as the research site was at least partly a subjective and arbitrary one, but also one which I hope is defensible. Its location made it relatively convenient for me, but the library also encapsulated many of the qualities which I had set out to identify – it was in a setting which was not too familiar to me but not wholly unfamiliar either; the branch itself was neither too lavishly-resourced nor too shabby; the local area was not noticeably affluent or noticeably deprived. The layout of the branch also made it a good setting in which to observe everyday life – the open-plan nature of the library meant that one could sit in different parts of the library and still get a decent view of what was going on.

This made the branch a good research site and theoretically also one which felt (to me at least) typical enough to offer data which would be indicative of a wider state of affairs within the library service. Having said that, generalisability in any ethnography should come with certain caveats. An in-depth, detailed, long-term study of this nature, almost by definition, is set very firmly in a particular research site, and any attempt to over-generalise the findings emanating from it is problematic. The criticism of the bounded research site and of “the convention of restricting ethnographic description to a delimited fieldsite, or locale, and set of subjects” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 90) may have its justifications, but so too does single-site research. Although my original intention had been to observe life at several branch libraries to allow for comparison, it soon became apparent to me that more meaningful and ultimately useful data would be gleaned from an in-depth study of one branch. I occasionally visited other libraries during the course of the research, and these visits were enormously helpful in allowing me to identify which issues which were typical across the library service and which were unique to Llanccarreg alone. However, these visits also underlined how library services vary according to location, and that an understanding of the library service is to understand it as it is experienced by users at that same local level.

Very few references are made to other branches in the chapters which follow, but seeing them made me firmer in my belief that Llanccarreg was the most fitting choice of research site for a study of this nature, and that a single-site project offered specific benefits for what I set out to explore. As one recent defence of the ‘arbitrary location’ research framework puts it:

The decision to bound off a site for the study of ‘something else’, with all the blind-spots and limitations which this implies, is a productive form of methodological asceticism. (Candea, 2007: 180, original emphasis)

For me, conducting research on a single site ultimately led me to the same conclusion as Candea, because the depth of study afforded by single-site ethnography allowed me a great deal of freedom to explore the emergent data and to do so with more certainty than might otherwise have been the case. The time

spent in the single branch at Llancarreg gave me the confidence in my data and my observations to extrapolate themes and ideas.

To put it another way, all ethnography by definition is local, but that need not prevent it from making wider, more generalisable, claims (Burawoy, 2000). What is important is for the research data to be sufficiently robust when analysed so it provides a strong basis for any claims which are made. While detractors of the ethnographic tradition may criticise single-case research, such a study can produce useful results from which wider conclusions can be drawn:

...ethnographers feel that an in-depth study that gives accurate knowledge of one setting not markedly dissimilar from other relevant settings is likely to be generalisable in substantial degree to these other settings. (Spindler, 1982: 8)

The research setting in this study offered a comprehensive outlook on the social setting of an individual library and a chance to understand the multi-layered social life within it – an opportunity which would not have been possible using any other research method or by adopting a multi-sited approach to the research.

Having chosen the research site, the issue of access was the next to be negotiated. One could argue that the library is a public setting, and therefore one which requires no formal access to be negotiated:

...problems of access could be avoided if one were to study 'public' settings only... In one sense this is true. Anyone can, in principle, enter such public domains; that is what makes them public. No process of negotiation is required for that (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 55/6)

Whilst this is undoubtedly true, I had no desire (and certainly no obvious pressing need) for the research to be carried out covertly. Indeed, because I needed to speak at length with front-line staff and users about the branch and their use of it, it would have been counter-intuitive to have concealed my researcher role – being open about what I was doing from the very start made me (and, I believe, my informants) more comfortable with the relationship. For that reason, formal access was negotiated at an early stage prior to the commencement of fieldwork. I began

by writing to the most senior library officer at the local authority³⁰ to explain my research and ask whether they had any objection to me conducting the research project in the branch library. When I received a response from the officer in question, she implied that although she was not particularly enamoured with the idea of a researcher sitting in one of her libraries, she had no formal objection provided the branch staff were happy with the arrangement. Her concern that I might have been a distraction to staff and users might well have been a fair one, although I hope that ultimately neither group found my presence to be an irritation.

I am more convinced that I had the willing and informed consent of the staff at Llancarreg branch itself to conduct research. Throughout the research period, the staff were nothing other than helpful and enthusiastic informants who understood that I would use the information they gave me appropriately and responsibly. I was grateful for the keenness with which staff answered my questions and gave me access to as much of the branch as they felt able. At no point did any of the staff seek to control or regulate the access I had, and I was (and am) grateful for their understanding.

3.3.2: Data collection

In simple terms, the research took the form of an in-depth qualitative study, using ethnographic participant observation as its central research method. Over the course of a fifteen month period between May 2006 and September 2007, an ethnography was carried out in a branch library in a South Wales city suburb (a setting which will be described in much greater detail in the following chapter). During that period, generally four days a week were spent 'in the field', depending on the hours of opening.

However, such a description of the fieldwork process, whilst accurate, does not do justice to (or adequately explain) the mechanics of the data collection.

³⁰ As mentioned above, at this early stage I was anticipating a multi-site research project, so I actually wrote to two separate individuals, as one of the branches I had considered was in another authority area. Here, I shall just explain the process relating to Llancarreg.

Particularly in a study about the everyday, one must explain the minutiae of what exactly one did as a researcher during the hours of fieldwork. The bulk of the fieldwork material in the following chapters consists of fieldnotes taken in the branch library at Llancarreg, coupled with extensive quotes from staff and library users during conversational interviews.

The fieldnote data was generated by copious note-taking and sketching of the day-to-day events of the library. The loose aim, as Goodall poetically puts it, was to “attribute in words what is unsaid, what is unspoken, or what casually but perceptibly drifts, like smoke amongst strangers” (Goodall, 2000: 87). In practical terms, I would usually arrive at the branch shortly after opening time and position myself at one of the various vantage points afforded by the branch’s layout – my usual spots were either at the work desk in the middle of the branch or on one of the sofas (see the plan of the library on page 90), although I would occasionally sit at the IT desk and type fieldnotes in order to see the branch from a different viewpoint. Particularly during the early stage of the fieldwork, it was useful to jot down the routines and day-to-day events of the branch to get a feel for the library and its users. Over time, as I got to know more people, I felt able to speak to staff and users for longer periods and could position myself by the issue desk to chat to staff (and to the users who came there). Of course, this came with its own set of problems – not least that it was hard to engage in conversations and simultaneously record events in the branch. Fortunately, the tempo of the library day allowed frequent opportunities to return to the work desk and expand on the hastily-scribbled notes to provide a more accurate record of events. I also used time away from the library in the evenings to record as much as possible from the day’s notes. On occasions, I would necessarily have to spend half a day or more away from Llancarreg to allow myself the space (both intellectually and physically) to write and review fieldnote material and to turn my attention to the emerging themes from the data.

The fieldnotes reported events in the library very simply at first, but became more detailed as time went on, and I hope that this detail adds to their vitality and reliability. They were often written almost contemporaneously with events; the library offering an ideal environment in which to jot down material

unobtrusively. Even then, however, the fieldnotes only represent my best recollection of events and necessarily therefore have a degree of subjectivity and selective recording about them (see Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001).

I would argue, however, that other methods would have been no less problematic – audio recording, for example, requires a range of decisions around what to record and when to transcribe, and would have been logistically more difficult in the setting; it could also have made it harder for participants (particularly staff) to feel they were able to speak openly. In comparison, the pressures which exist when writing fieldnotes can also be seen as a strength:

...fieldnotes have a distinctive writing style marked by flowing, even hurried, outbursts of words, often dashed down on the page in uncensored, yet focused ways (Emerson *et al*, 2001: 358)

The object in fieldnotes... is to get information down as correctly as you can and be as honest with yourself as possible (Lofland & Lofland, 1995: 96)

It was partly for these reasons that the conversational interviews with key participants were not tape recorded in any way, although contemporaneous notes were also taken where possible. This helped me to gain an organic, natural relationship with participants. My own experience of tape-recorded interviews is that people become more reticent or clam up when they feel their words are being recorded, and my preference was for more conversational interviews where I would keep short notes on which to expand later in the day. Indeed, for this reason the interviews generally were conducted during the course of the library day amidst the hubbub and against the backdrop of everyday library life. It might have been easier, in one sense, to have conducted them somewhere quieter, away from the library – but I found that carrying them out *in situ* allowed participants to point to or draw on what was happening in the branch at the time.³¹ It also made for a more relaxed, familiar setting which I felt gave me a greater breadth and depth of interview data. This was particularly true of staff members, who felt they could dictate the direction of the conversation because they were in ‘their’ branch

³¹ Hall, Lashua & Coffey (2008) have written in greater detail about the advantages of background noise in a research setting to give a “productive context for the creative disturbance of the conventional interview” (1019).

and they felt in control. I would, on occasions, have to temporarily halt an interview with a staff member to allow them to serve a user or deal with a query, but I felt that these interruptions were a price worth paying for a chance to see and ask questions about the rudimentaries of the work they were undertaking.

For these conversational interviews, I felt I always adequately explained my role as a researcher – but, of course, the degree of detail given to participants varied each time. Those informants who used the branch regularly became acquaintances with whom I developed a relationship, and as such they had a greater knowledge and understanding of what I was doing in the branch than some of the more infrequent visitors to whom I spoke. Again, it could be reasonably argued that the public nature of the setting required minimal (if any) information to be given to such individuals:

There are public settings... when access cannot be successfully negotiated with all participants. In each instance, there is no opportunity for the researcher to have full permission to observe for research purposes in such settings... Negotiating directly with those on whom researchers intend to focus their studies is a difficult requirement to fulfil in a public setting (Burgess, 1984: 49)

I took a slightly different view, and made every reasonable and realistic effort to – at the very least – tell people that I was a university student doing a project on a public library and its users, and to ask whether I could speak to them. For most people, this information was sufficient – over the whole time of the fieldwork process, only a few people asked me for more information, and only two said they did not want to take part.³² This experience reflects a more general trend in ethnographic writing:

I simply explained that to graduate from college, I must write a lengthy paper and that instead of doing a lot of research in a library,³³ 'I'm gonna write it on you guys down here and what kinds of jobs you want to go into after school and stuff like that.' In general, they seemed happy to be the subjects of my research and patiently answered my questions,

³² These individuals are not therefore mentioned in the fieldnote data or anywhere else in the chapters which follow.

³³ MacLeod's turn of phrase does not, hopefully, include those doing ethnographic research in a library, although it does hint at the distinctions between perceived 'gritty', 'urban' settings and those which are 'safe' and 'familiar'. Chapter 1 has hopefully dealt with this distinction already and made the case for the study of such locations.

which gradually became more direct, pointed, and frequent. (MacLeod, 1987: 281)

I soon found that people were developing their own explanation about me: I was writing a book about Cornerville. This might seem entirely too vague an explanation, and yet it sufficed. I found that my acceptance in the district depended on the personal relationships I developed far more than upon any explanations I might give. (Whyte, 1993: 300)

As with MacLeod and Whyte, the shorthand explanations I adopted (or which were attributed to me by others) sufficed as reasonable intermediate steps – providing enough detail for the participant to be informed about the situation, but avoiding a lengthy explanation which might have been burdensome and tiresome for the informant. For the longer conversational interviews, therefore, I am absolutely satisfied that the participants were given sufficient information about my role before they agreed to take part. As I shall discuss in the next section, the far greater challenge related to those individuals who featured in the fieldnote data as library users but were not direct informants.

I have already alluded to the ebbs and flows of activity in the library during a normal week, which included prolonged periods of quiet in which the branch might be empty for sustained periods. During these quieter moments, I could write up fieldnotes or speak to staff, usually from the vantage point of the work desk in the middle of the branch. During the busier parts of the library day, there would be a great deal of social activity in the library, particularly amongst the band of regulars, many of whom became key participants. The level of social interaction and the strength of the bonds between the social actors within the setting soon became apparent, and it was clear that the site offered the potential for rich data.

It was precisely because the research site offered such a rich variety of experiences, actions and narratives involving the social actors within it that ethnography was the best method by which to translate those experiences into usable data. The fact that the activities observed in the research were largely mundane, everyday actions suggests that any method for observing them should be equally grounded in everyday life. Qualitative research in general, and ethnography in particular, offered a simple and effective way to tap into the social

realm of the public library by using a research method which was both unobtrusive and consistent with the world it was considering. As McNeill has noted:

The central characteristic of social action is that it has meaning for the people who are involved in it. They understand what is going on in ways that make sense to them and, if we want to understand their behaviour, we have to start from where they are. People are active, conscious, and choose to behave as they do, rather than being driven to it by social forces outside their control. (McNeill, 1990: 69)

That element of 'starting where they are', the importance of which is underlined by so many guides to ethnographic work (Atkinson *et al*, 2001; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Spradley, 1979, 1980), made it imperative to participate alongside the different groups within the field in order to fully comprehend the meaning behind the social action within the library.

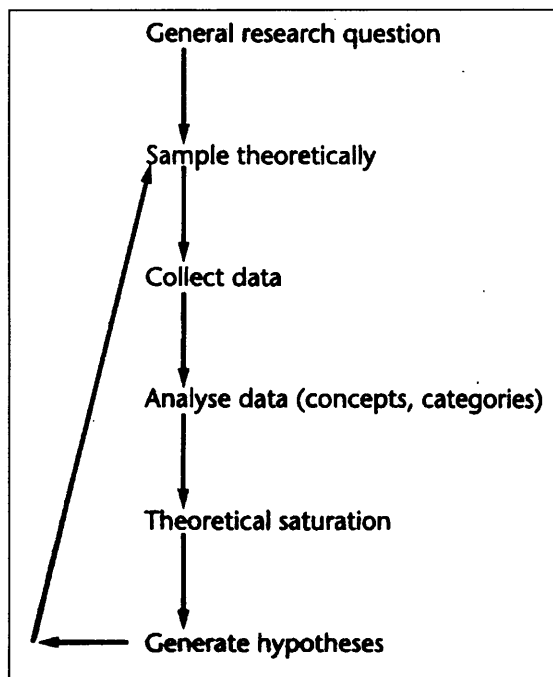
This approach also offered the advantage of providing data which I felt accurately reflected the everyday life of the branch library. The participant observation method gave me the luxury of being able to take ownership of the data which was generated and to feel confident of its accuracy – a benefit noted by many other writers, including Becker & Geer:

...participant observation makes it possible to check descriptions against fact and, noting discrepancies, become aware of the systematic distortions made by the person under study; such distortions are less likely to be discovered by interviewing alone. (Becker & Geer, 1957: 31)

Ethnographic methods promoted the opportunity to immerse myself fully in the research project, offering a more holistic set of data than might otherwise have been the case. The need for such an approach is clear from the experiences of other ethnographers (MacLeod's comments that "the best fieldwork emerges when the sociologist is completely immersed in the community under study" – MacLeod, 1987: 270 – typically and neatly encapsulates that view). By spending such a long period 'in the field', both the methods and the experience of observing became second nature after a short time, which allowed the data (rather than the practicalities of research itself) to become the focal point of the study. As Spradley has put it: "By cutting oneself off from other interests and concerns, by

listening to informants hour on end, by participating in the cultural scene, and by allowing one's mental life to be taken over by the new culture, themes often emerge" (Spradley, 1980: 145).

The use of ethnography also offered the chance for a reflexive, cyclical research design so that the research could be moulded as time went by to focus more on the emergent key issues. A reflexive approach along such lines has long been considered a key part of good ethnographic fieldwork; Whyte noted in *Street Corner Society* that "[w]e do not generally think problems through in a straight line" (Whyte, 1993: 279) and instead a flexible, adaptable approach is needed to allow the research to mould according to its needs. By doing so in this research, a cyclical research model emerged which allowed initial findings to be analysed and the research questions modified accordingly in a way which adopted good research practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While the main foreshadowed ideas remained constant, they also allowed for a subtle shift in emphasis as the research progressed, again in keeping with the principles of ethnography and qualitative research. This iterative, cyclical process can be illustrated by the diagram below:



(taken from Bryman, 2001: 303)

The nature of the research model proved extremely useful in allowing me to adapt

and shape the research according to the emergent themes (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

By the end of the data collection phase, I had hundreds of pages of fieldnotes, organised chronologically, which formed the starting point for data analysis and writing-up.³⁴ This daunting process, over several months, did offer the compensation of some time and distance away from the field to reflect on the research experience and think more analytically about the research site and the people within it. Initially, I began by writing more extended analytic fieldnotes on particular events and themes, but this approach was gradually superseded by a more formalised process of decontextualisation and recontextualisation (Gibbs, 2007; Gobo, 2008) which involved revisiting the (mostly handwritten) fieldnotes and identifying themes and topics. With the data then organised thematically rather than chronologically, I was able to again build up a more comprehensive idea of what constituted the main emerging themes and could begin to analyse the findings in more detail.

3.3.3: Research relations & ethical considerations

Decisions around ethical considerations for qualitative research are rarely clear-cut (Becker, 1964; Hammersely, 2009; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Penn & Soothill, 2007). Ethical guidelines and statements of ethical practice can never be expected to provide simple answers to complex problems which arise in the field, meaning that the researcher often has to rely on their own judgment about what is the right course of action. This section will outline the guidelines and considerations which informed the key decisions in this research and explain how specific ethical quandaries were dealt with.

Unlike in natural science, social scientists (and qualitative researchers in particular) have to engage directly and personally with their subject matter. Any

³⁴ A disingenuous phrase at best, implying that all the researcher needs to do is neatly type up and present the raw data. My own experience was of months of work sifting through the data making analytic notes as lengthy and detailed as the fieldnotes themselves before strong themes really began to take shape.

set of ethical principles which are arbitrary, overly-rigid or inflexible do not allow the intellectual leeway required by those studying themes which are often emotive and complex. The British Sociological Association's statement of ethical practice acknowledges as much, stating specifically that:

The statement does not... provide a set of recipes for resolving ethical choices or dilemmas, but recognises that it will be necessary to make such choices on the basis of principles and values, and the (often conflicting) interests of those involved. (BSA, 2002: 1)

This research therefore sought to meet high ethical standards whilst also dealing with the necessity of a flexible approach which could adapt to the unfolding events of the research setting.

The research methods employed were examined by the Ethics Committee for the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, and were deemed to be appropriate for an ethnography of this type. The steps taken on, for example, anonymisation (which will be outlined later) provided an ethical backbone to the fieldwork undertaken. Additionally, the ESRC's own ethical framework (ESRC, 2005) was frequently referred to throughout the research process as a useful point of reference on ethical issues.

The central challenge for the data collection centred around the important but often unfeasible aim of securing informed consent from participants. The BSA guidelines states that:

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used. (BSA, 2002: 3)

The problem posed in this case was the fact that the research site was a (sometimes) busy public setting which was used by completely different people from one day to the next – many of whom might visit the site very rarely. Had I unquestioningly adhered to the letter rather than the spirit of the BSA guidelines, not only would I have had to secure consent from everyone who entered the

library (distracting me from being able to observe what was actually taking place elsewhere in the building whilst doing so), I would also have had to explain a hundred times a day to the various users who I was and what I was doing (losing further valuable research time). As stated earlier, this was possible to an extent with the regular users who became key participants – but it was less realistic for those irregular users who might have come to the branch just once or twice during the fieldwork process. In that instance, I felt that such a process would have been counter-productive, not least because it would have been meaningless and irksome for those individuals.

This lengthy process would also have served to make library users more aware of the research than would have been either desirable or necessary, with the result of creating an artificial atmosphere to the research site which would have negated the reliability of the findings. The BSA guidelines acknowledge that “difficulties arise when research participants change their behaviour because they know they are being studied” (BSA, 2002: 4) and also accepts that research in public spaces raises different ethical questions to those in non-public spaces.

Indeed, I would argue that the public nature of the research setting makes it significantly different from many research sites and that ethical principles must be adapted to account for it. People’s actions and behaviour in public space can be seen as akin to a ‘performance’ (Goffman, 1959), expecting and anticipating being observed to a greater or lesser extent. People may not expect to be observed by social researchers in public, but they cannot reasonably expect to act as though hidden by a cloak of invisibility either. The public arena is “the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds” (Carr, Francis, Rivlin & Stone, 1992: 3). Public space already elicits presentational reactions from people even before any element of official research enters the arena. If communal life is ‘unfolding upon the stage of public space’, then the participants within it are already acting in ways which would involve elements of self-awareness and consciousness of social conventions (Goffman, 1959). In terms of officially-sanctioned and fully-negotiated access, therefore, it could be argued that public actions are legitimate objects for research, and as such require no consent at all as participants – through their very presence – have already accepted a degree of observation from those

around them.

Nevertheless, certain boundaries were adopted both for the good of the discipline as a whole and to ensure my own clear conscience in collecting data. The first was the simple but important step of anonymising participants within the fieldnotes, changing names and sometimes other details (where this did not have a direct impact on the clarity of the data) before notes were transcribed. BSA guidelines recommend that the “anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process should be respected” (BSA, 2002: 5), and this advice was adhered to.³⁵

Not only were participants anonymised, but the research site itself has been kept confidential. The level at which one anonymises is not a straightforward decision – the privacy of participants must be balanced with the need to provide the context of the research site – and this research was no exception. The decision was taken early on in the writing-up stage to state simply and truthfully that the research site was a suburb of a South Wales city; this hopefully provides sufficient detail to give a rough idea of the geographical and socio-cultural setting but without compromising the anonymity of the site and the participants.

The complication with this decision lay around the use of photographs of the library site which had been collected during the fieldwork. This was originally born of a desire to have additional data to complement the ethnographic fieldnotes and to illustrate some of the descriptive passages. Ultimately, however, I took the decision to not use the photographs of Llanccarreg library for ethical reasons; being able to identify the library would have allowed readers to identify participants (specifically staff members and certain regulars) and would have

³⁵ While I was (and still am) content to have anonymised participants in the data, I have some sympathy with those such as Duneier who have pointed out the discrepancy by which social scientists have to anonymise in order to protect their interviewees, but journalists have to name their sources for their stories to maintain credibility (Duneier, 1999: 347). That could be seen to demonstrate a greater degree of trust amongst the academic world about the integrity of researchers. Alternatively, it could imply an acceptance in society that people in public settings accept and expect a degree of scrutiny of their public actions – which chimes with the points raised above.

contradicted ethical guidelines and my own judgement about what was the right decision.

I have also tried to avoid including any material which could be construed as embarrassing to the participant concerned. In truth, there was very little in the typical library day which would prove salacious or scandalous; nevertheless, in the few instances where particular details could have discomfited those involved, material has been omitted. Since such occasions were incidental to the analysis, I am satisfied that this has not compromised the data.

Ultimately, whatever the constraints of research and the need for an adaptable approach, I felt that as far as reasonably and practicably possible, the data was collected in an ethical and proper manner. This was an open, transparent ethnography, but one which at the same time accepted that “given the diversity and flexibility of ethnography, and the indeterminacy of potential harm, a prescriptive approach may be positively unhelpful” (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001: 347). It can therefore be claimed with some justification that the research was carried out in a manner which was both appropriate and ethical. The need for ethnographic fieldwork to be approached with flexibility as one of its over-riding considerations has been established, and it was therefore important to this study that ethical guidelines were used as just that – guidelines to help inform the research rather than a strict set of rules which would not allow for individual circumstances and specific requirements to mould the fieldwork as the research progressed.

3.4: Representation and reflexivity

There is often an intrinsically autobiographical element to ethnographic research, as many commentators have acknowledged (eg, Coffey, 1999, 2002; Davies, 1999; Delamont, 2007; Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 2001; Saukko, 2002). Whilst this study should not be seen as an auto-ethnographic account, it is still a piece of ethnography in which the researcher needs to reflect on their place in the field. A full and totally accurate reflection can only ever be an aspiration – partly because the effect of the researcher on the researched is

unknowable, and also because of the unknown extent to which a researcher can be a reliable and objective reporter of the social world:

...we can never fully know the subjective experience of ourselves or others, as our understanding is always infused with the social, which always partly operates behind our backs. Still, we can never capture the social either, as the social is not accessible to us in totality, but only from a subjective point of view (Saukko, 2002: 245)

Gauging the reliability of a researcher's account and assessing its impartiality is impossible. My own approach has been to temper any concerns I may have over my own neutrality and fairness by considering Lofland's advice: "Better the limitations and liabilities of analytic ethnography than no new knowledge, or 'knowledge' not rooted in intimate experience within its subject" (Lofland, 2002: 160). For all the problems such a position may cause, it is (I feel) an approach that enables an acknowledgement of shortcomings but also the benefits of the methods employed. Qualitative research in general, and ethnography in particular, is a complex business when it comes to relationships with participants. Even the most thick-skinned of researchers cannot, if they wish their research to be at all meaningful, keep a 'safe' distance away from participants at all times:

We cannot escape the necessity of developing rapport and a level of intimacy during the pursuit of prolonged fieldwork... Fieldwork simply will not generate good data and interesting analyses without personal investment in the relations of the field. (Coffey, 1999: 39-40)

My approach in this research has been to prioritise the rigorous collection of high-quality data in the hope that my "earned authority as narrator" (Fine, 2003: 42) helps to mitigate against any unintended prejudices or partialities of the data collection. My own natural preference in writing about my research was to adopt a traditional, realist approach, "implying an impersonal, all-but-invisible narrator... [and] presented from the point of view of one impartial author" (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2001: 9), acknowledging at the same time that such an approach is by no means the only method by which to present social research.

Whilst I have no opposition in principle to the increase in autobiographical and auto-ethnographic writing in recent years, I have no desire to contribute

further to the debates around their use. Arguments over “the extent to which our private experiences are (made) public – in both the framing of our research problems and our writings” (Coffey, 2007: 1) are nothing new (see, for example, Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 1996), and have to be viewed against the historical backdrop within qualitative research of a “tendency to view the self of the social science observer as a potential contaminant” (Fine *et al*, 2000: 108), and the notion that “there is no greater taboo than self-revelation” (Behar, 1996:26). From my own perspective, I note the important distinction between autoethnographic writing and autobiographical reflexivity (Delamont, 2009), and identify much more with the latter than the former – not least because of a belief that data and research should be presented in ways which privilege the voices of the participants ahead of the voice of the researcher. In this respect, I sympathise greatly with Hammersley’s criticisms of some manifestations of the more experimental sides of qualitative research:

What is essential, though, is that [non-standard forms of discourse such as dialogues or poems] are used in ways that are appropriate to the task involved; in the case of research, they must be subordinated to the purpose of developing arguments supported by evidence, that provide convincing answers to factual questions about the world... I believe that people who are engaged as social scientists, often on the basis of public funds, have an obligation to those outside the profession (particularly citizens who pay taxes and people who are subject to the research process) to pursue social science rather than aiming to produce literature or art. (Hammersley, 2010: 6/7)

This line between effective reflexivity and intellectual narcissism (Bourdieu, 2003; Davies, 1999) is one which I have chosen, deliberately, to avoid crossing.

Whilst I acknowledge the importance of reflexive practice, and embrace the importance of discussing the place of the researcher in research, it is nevertheless an area in which I still feel uncomfortable on a personal level – the distinction I would draw is between the welcome role of ‘the self’ in ethnographic research and a reluctance to discuss myself in relation to this study. This reticence is formed, at least partly, from a desire to place my primary focus on what Atkinson and Delamont (2010: 15) refer to as “the real stuff of research – collecting data about people’s everyday lives, analysing those data methodically, and publishing straightforward research papers and monographs” – an approach

which they contrast with “internecine disputes about epistemology, methods or textual genres” (2010: 12). My own preference has always been for these traditional research methods and practice, operating within the conventions of realist ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988) and the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). My following of conventional methods lies at the heart of my reluctance to explore my own feelings and thoughts. Indeed, in a perfect world, my desire would have been to entirely bypass the cliché whereby any participant-observer must “devote at least a chapter of [their] book or PhD thesis to a tortured, self-flagellating disquisition on the ethical and methodological difficulties of participant observation” (Fox, 2004: 4)³⁶.

In stating this reticence, I am – ironically – going some way towards revealing something of my own background, interests and approach. Professionally and academically, my background is heavily rooted in an interest in politics and social policy. This interest has not, I hope, encroached on my ability to be a neutral actor in the field, even if my background and interest have helped to inform my own perspective as a researcher.

In the chapters which follow, I do my best to highlight and reflect on the few instances during data collection where my own presence or circumstance had a clear bearing on the research process. My hope is that, by doing so, the data themselves are made stronger and more reliable because of this disclosure and transparency.

With that in mind, attention can now finally be turned to those data – starting with a detailed ethnographic description of Llancarreg and its library.

³⁶ Whilst some academics have criticised Fox’s work for a perceived lack of intellectual rigour (eg, Dutton, 2007; Mills, 2006), my own view is similar to that of Hart (2006) in that I see her straightforward approach to methodological issues as admirable, and believe that anything which makes the discipline of social science popular and accessible is to be welcomed.

4. Llancarreg: the conventions of the conventional

This chapter will describe the suburb of Llancarreg where this research took place, and in particular its branch library which was the site of the data collection. It will also introduce the individuals who became the key participants for the research. In doing so, I hope to outline the ordinariness of the setting (which lies at the heart of this research's contribution) and explain why Llancarreg library's familiarity makes it such an ideal site for social research.

I would like to begin, however, with a fieldnote which evokes some of the main themes of the research and also offers a vivid description of the research site. Such fieldnotes offer accounts of life in the library and, as such, allow us to analyse and explore everyday life in a familiar social setting.

It is a Monday morning in September. It is a blustery day in Llancarreg, with the wind battering against the large windows at the western end of the building, and occasional pockets of rain tapping lightly at the door.

I am sat in what has become my usual spot at the work table, sandwiched between the horror fiction and war & sea fiction shelves. I am wrapped in a warm coat and a woolly hat to keep out the cold which has permeated the library for the first time in many months. Autumn has arrived, and in many ways it feels as though life at Llancarreg has returned to its default setting. The schools in the area have gone back, the evenings have started drawing in and it feels as if summer never really happened at Llancarreg library at all. Like the weather itself, activity in the library burned brightly for a few brief days, but without making a lasting impression, and it has now been surpassed by a gloomier, colder climate.

This morning, there has been one solitary user in the branch for the entire first hour or so of opening, and the only noise comes from the whistle of the kettle in the back room of the library where Clarrie (the head librarian of the branch) is making her third cuppa of the morning, partly out of a lack of much else to do.

It contrasts starkly to the few days in August when some of the big events planned for the summer brought new faces into the branch and gave the library an undeniable buzz. One event, for example, saw animals brought into the library by staff from a zoo, with a long talk to dozens of children about the different creatures. Staff also designed

new eye-catching displays around the library (in the children's section particularly) about new books which were out, and advertising regular events like the weekly storytime session.

The displays have now grown tired, familiar and tatty, and will almost certainly continue to do so as autumn turns to winter, then spring, at which point they might finally be replaced. The piles of free newspapers on the table where I am writing (one stack of *Positive News*, one of *Mature Times*) have recently been replenished, and a few might even be glanced at by the usual suspects (generally old men waiting for their wives to pick out books) before the piles get thrown out to make way for the next editions. The attempt by Clarrie and her colleagues to get the garden at the back of the branch cleared of overgrowth and rubbish so it can be turned into a 'Reading Haven' has also been shelved, after the change in the weather and the drop in visitor numbers (combined with the ongoing perennial wait for council workmen to get round to doing the job) made the plan pointless.

As the morning progresses, a few more users come in – Reg, the most regular of all the regulars at the branch, pops in and settles down on the sofa with the local paper after exchanging pleasantries with Clarrie. He is shortly joined by one or two others of his 'gang' who tend to meet at the library on a Monday morning for a chat before getting the bus into town. They talk idly about the weekend's sports results and a couple of the stories in today's local paper, proffering opinions on the main issues of the day. Meanwhile, a couple of toddlers are brought to the library for the weekly storytime session (which the toddlers sit through unmoved but which provides a convenient justification for the mothers to sit and catch their breath for half an hour). Jez, one of the younger regulars, sits at a computer for twenty minutes or so, flicking idly through job adverts before giving up and checking his Facebook account.

None of these events seem important; indeed, compared to the one-off frenetic activities in some of the summer days, they are mundane and prosaic – but they are life in the branch, habitual activities at the coal-face of a suburban branch library.

This short extract shows Llanccarreg library at its most normal – a bit drab, humdrum, ticking over at its own pace. The familiarity of the branch – the same notices on the same boards, the same piles of papers in the same place, the same staff grumbling about the same constraints – is arguably a weakness, but also a key positive asset to attract and retain users. Indeed, the words which sum it up – 'shabby', 'familiar' – are words which can be interpreted in different, opposing ways: 'shabby' reflects the scruffiness and decay of the branch, but it is also a word which evokes a sense of cosiness and informality; 'familiar' reflects

predictability but also a sense of intimacy. The description above, and the descriptions which follow, reflect this. Llancarreg library is by no means without its shortcomings, but it does also have an attraction to many of its users and is a welcome refuge for them from the outside world.

With that prologue in mind, we can now begin properly our tour of Llancarreg itself.

4.1: Arriving into Llancarreg³⁷

The traffic is the giveaway about the sort of place Llancarreg is. As one approaches the area in the morning along the dual carriageway which links it to the motorway and the nearby city, one cannot help but notice that the flow of traffic in the other direction is much thicker and more congested. Sales reps in smart saloons and mums on the school run sit in tailbacks at roundabouts, whilst our side of the road is, at most, a gentle trickle of the occasional lorry heading to the industrial estates or pensioners on the way to the supermarket. The pavements of Llancarreg itself also tell a story; virtually devoid of pedestrian life at this early hour of the day, save for the occasional teenager ambling slowly to school, happy to take as long as they can over their journey. Instead, the majority of residents take their cars or the bus, and head out of the area for the duration of the working day.

This is suburbia; commuter territory, a sea of smart semis with well-tended gardens and clean cars on the driveway, with the boundary markers of Llancarreg (a large factory at one end, rolling hills at the other) contrasting starkly with the genteel, self-styled suburban idyll.

Coming into Llancarreg by car is the easiest and most efficient method, but there are alternatives – the four different bus routes which pass through

³⁷ It would be remiss here not to acknowledge the stylistic influence on this section of Frankenberg's *Village On The Border* (1957). Frankenberg's opening passage describes Pentrediwaith through the route one would take to arrive there and, in doing so, makes the reader become a literary visitor to the village. My intention here is similar, although the context and place itself is rather different.

Llancarreg offer various paths to the city for between £1.50 and £2 return, and all take about the same amount of time (15-25 minutes depending on the route and the traffic). The many and well-used bus services are another indication of the type of place Llancarreg is – its sizeable elderly community help make the bus routes viable, but the morning and evening buses are also vital for the workers heading into the city centre; ‘standing room only’ at rush hour is common.

Older residents will tell you that Llancarreg is not a suburb at all. Historically, it was two separate villages, but the growth of the nearby city, and the consequent growth of its surrounding neighbourhoods, led to the villages becoming conflated and ultimately merging into one seamless suburb in the early twentieth century. The much more recent building of the dual carriageway connecting the city (to the south of Llancarreg) with the valleys (to the north) has once again split the suburb in two – but the split now is more of an arbitrary one, with the various shops, pubs and services scattered on both sides of the bridges which overlook the bypass. The area is now thought of as one place, both in administrative terms and by those who inhabit it. Only the retired residents can remember the days of “upper Llan” and “lower Llan”, and their references to the old place names are either made in jest or in a moment of nostalgia.³⁸ The distinction between the two ends of the village highlight both the division of the village but also its shared identity.

From its roots as two rural villages, Llancarreg grew around the turn of the Twentieth Century, more than doubling in population size as demand increased for workers in local industry. The growth (both geographical and financial) continued after the Second World War when a power station was built, providing a large number of jobs for the area. New houses were also built – what is now a rather grim estate on the edge of Llancarreg provided modern 1950s homes, while a number of prefabs (some of which still remain) were erected near to newly-built flats further down the main road between the library and the Post Office. The area was largely self-sufficient at this time, the proximity to the nearby city being more

³⁸ The few Welsh-speaking residents on Llancarreg sometimes use the original Welsh place names for the upper and lower ends of the suburb, both of which still also survive in some of the road signs and street names.

of a useful coincidence than a defining feature of the area. However, the power station was demolished in 1991 and, in its place, a large new estate was built to provide much-needed houses for young families keen to set up home near to the M4 corridor. The area's suburban status, linked by buses to the nearby city and by dual carriageway to the motorway and beyond, has been assured ever since. The change has not been an unusual one for a suburb of this size, and fits into a general pattern of an "industrial/residential suburb [which] contains not only factories but also a sizeable resident population who work in the area" becoming a "dormitory or residential suburb... heavily dependent upon the city for the provision of services" (Thorns, 1972: 79).

This dependence on services from elsewhere is swiftly apparent from a walk through Llanccarreg. The area has a small selection of shops and businesses to cater for residents' basic needs – a convenience store, a Post Office, four pubs, three churches, a florist, a greengrocer, two barber shops, one baker, and a rather tatty shop selling what could, at best, be euphemistically described as bric-a-brac. In other words, there are enough shops for the people of Llanccarreg to not need to travel beyond the village boundaries, but not quite enough for that to be an attractive option.

The area is a broadly affluent one, but not exclusively so – the areas of gentrification around the library are offset by some of the ageing, crumbling flats and prefabs in "upper Llan". The mixture is largely in keeping with the reputation of the area for being a small but generally well-to-do suburb with a few less-moneyed enclaves.³⁹

This is, therefore, an unremarkable city suburb, bisected by a busy dual carriageway, intermingled with several small industrial estates; not the sort of place one would choose for a day out, because there is nothing noteworthy to see,

³⁹ In drier statistical terms, census data states that Llanccarreg is a suburb of some 9000 people, with relatively low levels of unemployment (between three and four percent). The village is overwhelmingly white, while 27% of residents in the area are pensioners, ensuring Llanccarreg has a close-knit elderly community who form the bulk of the library's users. (NB – a reference has not been provided here to maintain the anonymity of Llanccarreg as a research site; to disclose the source of the statistics would effectively identify Llanccarreg itself)

but a pleasant enough place to live – or, more accurately, to sleep. Like so many British suburbs which have “become dormitories rather than centres of life” (Baggini, 2007: 10), Llanccarreg is eerily quiet during the day when a significant proportion of its residents have left the area altogether.

That said, my own impressions from spending time in the area are that Llanccarreg is a friendly place (compared, at least, to the inner-city surroundings from which I travelled daily to the library), and people are generally at ease with one another and prepared to speak to strangers (not least, thankfully, myself). What it lacks in vim, it makes up for in congeniality. It is not the mythical, unspoiled suburban idyll – there are regular skirmishes between local teenagers on the recreation ground, and incidents of crime or anti-social behaviour (more often than not within walking distance of the Prince of Wales pub) – but it is not an especially threatening place, nor one in which there seems to be any great tension between any sections of the community. Its affluence as a neighbourhood is apparent in some areas, but not in all – those areas of gentrification are offset by some of the ageing, crumbling flats in “Upper Llan”, in need of a facelift.

This sense of a carefully-balanced social equilibrium is arguably the highest compliment which can be paid to a suburban community like Llanccarreg, as it highlights the delicate mix of sociability and atomisation which makes the suburb what it is (Baggini, 2007; Baumgartner, 1988; Kelly, 1989; Martin, 2003; Richards, 1973). Peoples’ largely well-mannered, affable sensibilities in social situations are mixed with a desire for private, individuated space. They move to the suburb to be around people like themselves, but not necessarily to interact socially with them (at least not beyond exchanging pleasantries).

That inclination – for community, but also for solitude – rather neatly encapsulates suburbia; it certainly encapsulates Llanccarreg. If we delve a little closer into Llanccarreg, we also find those qualities espoused in its public library – ostensibly a public space, but also one in which individuals’ experiences are frequently very personal, private ones. It is this space at Llanccarreg to which we will now turn our attention – firstly by attending to the physical space itself and then, in the subsequent section, to the social order therein.

4.2: Llancarreg Library

The history of Llancarreg library is less important to a study of this nature than its current use, but it does provide some context to the physical space of the building and, to a lesser extent, the local community's views of it. The library was built in 1905, thanks largely to a gift of £1,400 towards its construction from the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.⁴⁰ It originally consisted of a lending library, reading room and a reference department, and it opened from 10am to 10pm daily,⁴¹ with the lending department open once a week.

More recently, the library was threatened with closure in 1991 by the local council, for whom the combination of a prime piece of saleable land and an old building with high maintenance costs seemed too tempting an opportunity. They had not counted, however, on the strong opposition from local residents, including Reg and his gang of library regulars (who will be introduced in the next section) who formed an active and vocal 'Save Our Library' campaign which ultimately proved successful. Following a large local petition and a lively demonstration outside the Council offices, the closure plan was quietly dropped, and instead steps were taken to restore the library and bring it up to the prevailing standards of the time. The library was thus refurbished in 1992/3, and has remained largely unchanged (both externally and internally) since then. The modern trend for bright, vivid colours in libraries is not apparent in Llancarreg; instead, neutral, pastel shades and slightly antiquated furniture dominate the setting.

The library lies on the western edge of the suburb of Llancarreg, flanked on either side by a row of Victorian terraced houses, opposite a large industrial estate housing an aluminium processing plant. The building is Grade II listed, and the architecture is impressive, but not strikingly so – the grey flagstones, on a rainy or overcast day, give it a dark and gloomy feel. The building is also set back

⁴⁰ For a fuller account of Carnegie's generosity to public libraries in South Wales and beyond, the excellent biographies by Peter Krass (2002) and James Mackay (1997) offer a comprehensive background.

⁴¹ This contrasts starkly to the shorter – and more changeable – opening times which exist now.

from the main road, meaning that one can easily walk or drive past it without it catching one's eye.⁴² Nevertheless, on a bright day the library can look more imposing, and the grass bank in front of it is lit up by patches of daffodils. The clump of ivy to one side of the building also gives an impression of the age and history of the building. The library is accessed via a set of stairs, which have been supplemented more recently by a disabled ramp to one side.

To the side of the library and behind it is a small, walled garden, with a little patio and a lawn – all of which is closed off to members of the public by a black fence. Periodically, library staff have considered opening the garden up to the public, so users can read in the garden during the summer months, but the arrangement has usually been a passing, temporary one.⁴³

The door of the library is painted a bright blue. The outer door is generally propped open during the library day, except during wet or blustery weather when it is kept shut. The library's opening hours are displayed prominently in one window pane – Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday (opening at 9am, closing either at 5 or 5.30 except for a late 7pm close on a Monday – all with a one hour break for lunch at 1pm). Between the outer and inner door is a small lobby where, until recently, surplus library stock was sold off (for 20p per book) – this arrangement, however, was thought by management to give a bad impression of the service, and so was discontinued.⁴⁴

However, it is inside the library where the space and layout gives the greatest indication of the type of institution this is. The 'dusty shelves and musty smells' which form the basis of many users' fascination with the public library

⁴² Indeed, for an institution like the library service which prides itself on being a resource for anyone walking in 'off the street', Llancarreg library's position away from the street has been an intense disadvantage. Some residents of Llancarreg commented that they were not even aware that there was a library in the area, such was its position on the periphery of the suburb and away from the pavement.

⁴³ The fieldnote at the start of the chapter mentioned the most recent abortive attempt by staff to revive the idea, which failed after the workmen assigned to the task only got round to doing the job after the summer was over.

⁴⁴ This decision will be referred to more extensively in Chapter 5. For now, it will suffice to say that it caused disappointment amongst some staff and many users, for whom the very thought of surplus books being destroyed rather than sold was nothing short of an aberration.

service as a whole (see Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995) are very much present in Llancarreg. The shelves may be modern, utilitarian, low-level units with castors attached, and the smells may be of ten-year old Mills & Boon paperbacks rather than anything more cerebral, but the stereotype of the traditional library is not without some foundation, even if the reference points have moved with the times.

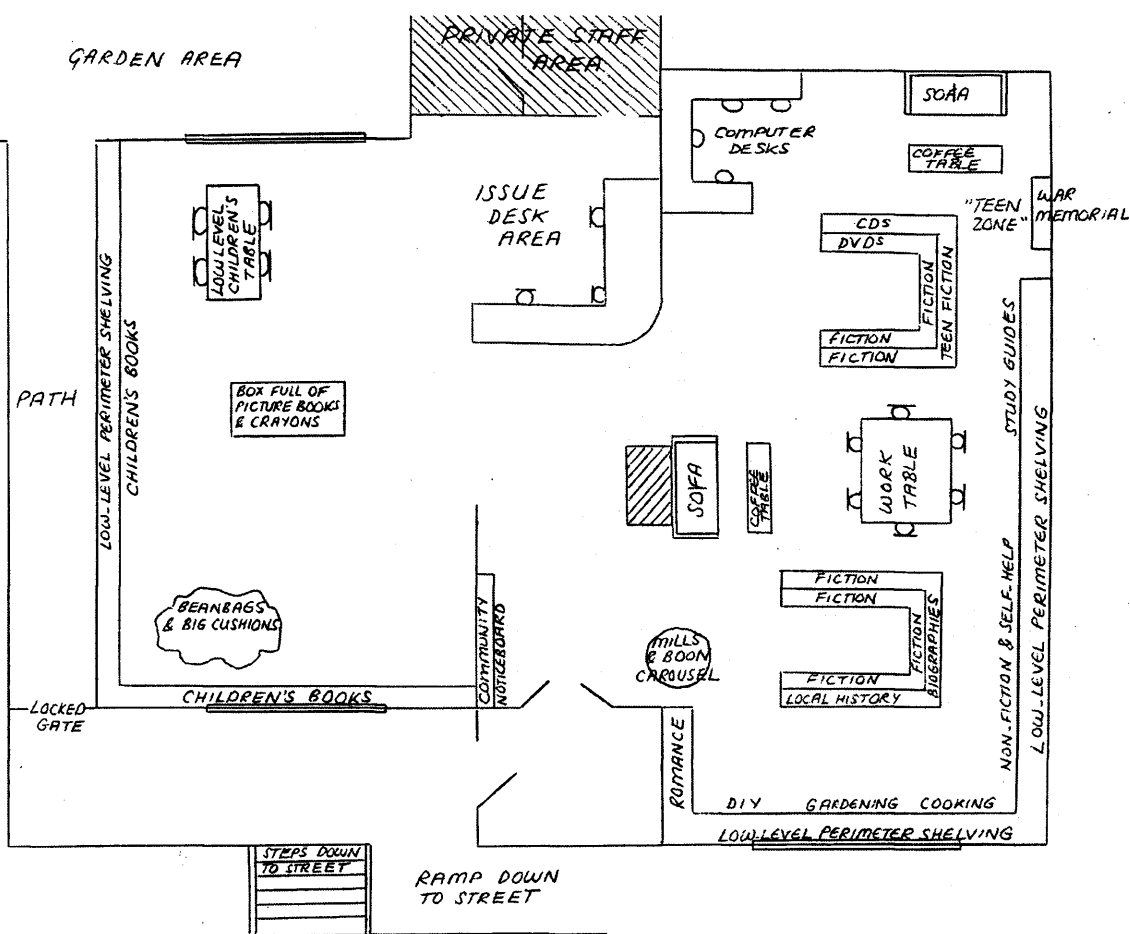
The public area of Llancarreg library is mapped out in the diagram overleaf, and measures roughly twenty square metres (or, as I counted on one rather drab, quiet day, 18 paces by 21 paces). It has been divided into smaller 'zones' by the way shelves are arranged, so that (for example) the northern end is set up predominantly with children in mind and the eastern end is the home to the computers. The central section offers a settee⁴⁵ and coffee table and a work desk, while the issue desk lies directly in front of the main entrance, allowing staff to see (and greet, if they so wished⁴⁶) users as soon as they came into the library.

The issue desk forms the central hub of the library in terms of activity. It is from here that staff run the library, and it is here that users have to come to do pretty much anything – whether to borrow or return a book, reserve a session on the computer, make any requests for reading material and so on. Users can just walk in and read a book or a newspaper on one of the sofas or at the work table, but beyond those basic activities, a trip to the issue desk is essential. Moreover, it is here that any enquiries, complaints, requests for help or problems can be directed – not always those related to the library's core activities. A library regular might use the issue desk as a catch-all point of contact for any activity carried out by the local authority – asking staff to check whether this week was the right one for putting out the recycling, checking bus times, asking about night classes and so on. It also serves a role for helping with practical problems (getting

⁴⁵ Another contested, value-laden word: "If an upholstered seat for two or more people is called a settee or couch, [its owners] are no higher than middle-middle [class]. If it is a sofa, they are upper-middle or above." (Fox, 2004: 78). I have hedged my bets by referring to a 'settee' in the text and a 'sofa' in the plan. The users of Llancarreg library, on the occasions when they referred to the item at all, probably erred towards 'settee'.

⁴⁶ As will be discussed in Chapter 7, this opportunity was generally taken by staff, although the position of the issue desk which allowed them to do it was probably not decided with this in mind. More plausible is that the desk had to be located where it was so only staff could access the back rooms of the library, the entrance to which lay behind the issue desk itself.

change for the bus, asking staff to lend a pen) as well as an all-important social function, allowing users to chat with staff members and each other (not least for many of the older regulars for whom the trip to the library is a valued opportunity for social interaction). In fact, the desk is far removed from existing solely for the issuing of books; if anything, it is an 'issue desk' in the sense that users can use it as an all-encompassing reference tool for any 'issues' (social, practical or – of course – library-orientated) which affect them.



Plan of Llancarreg Library

On the immediate left-hand side of the entrance, a pair of noticeboards are fixed to the back of some shelves providing an extra 'wall' to the children's zone. To those entering the library, the rather tatty noticeboards display a variety of signs and posters all of which vaguely fit under the auspices of 'Community Information'. Information such as the contact details for the local councillors and committee dates of the local council sit alongside more eye-catching signs

advertising yoga classes and photography competitions.⁴⁷

To the left of the library as one comes in, behind the noticeboard, lies the children's section of the library. The décor here is the same uniform drabness of beige and grey, but staff have made efforts to brighten up the colourlessness by adding displays, blu-tacked to the wall, about new books and advertising the storytime session, all in bright primary colours. In the middle of the area is a small, low-level table and chairs for children to use, and a small gaudy rug where staff ask the children to sit for the storytime sessions.

In the other, slightly larger, half of the library, the remaining 'zones' are set out slightly more neatly. In a relatively small space, four distinct areas can be identified. In the plan above, these are most easily identified as the work area by the table, the sofa area adjacent to it, the computer area by the IT desks, and the teen zone. This still left enough space to spare for all the books, CDs and DVDs which the branch had to offer.

The computer zone consists of four PCs, two by the back wall, one on the party wall between the library and the staff area, and one facing the main door. Mid-way through the research period, the larger, older monitors were all replaced with new flat-screen equivalents. The computers are generally in good condition, with fast internet connections and all the programmes (Windows XP, Word, PowerPoint, Excel etc) which one might generally want to use. There is no extra hardware available (scanners, webcams etc), although there is one printer, located at the issue desk, on which users can print whatever they wished at a cost of ten pence per A4 sheet.

The teen zone is next to the computer area – significantly, it is located as far away as possible from the children's area, and also is one of the few spaces in the branch which was not observable from the issue desk. The aspiration is to give

⁴⁷ Coates (2004) has written about how such facilities (if indeed such a description is not an overstatement) are frequently under-managed by staff, leading to them becoming an irrelevance. This was undoubtedly true of Llancarreg where, during the time I spent doing fieldwork, these notices hardly changed at all, and were seldom read by users visiting the library.

teenage users a space which is 'theirs', free of adult supervision and notably separate from their younger peers. This is perhaps undermined slightly by positioning it directly next to the very ornate but very un-cool war memorial (a large wooden roll of honour for the 55 men of the village who lost their lives in the Great War, emphasising the importance of the library as a focal point of the community). The area has a blue sofa and a low-level coffee table on which are various leaflets and pamphlets offering advice on all things from money matters to sexual health and how to deal with bullying. The book shelf, meanwhile, is full of pristine (and largely unread) fiction aimed at the 13-18 age group. Despite all the thought which has gone into the zone (which is also closely situated to the CDs and DVDs), it is very seldom used. During the average week at Llancarreg, the sofa will be sat on maybe once or twice (often by one girl in the sixth-form at the local secondary school who spends her free periods in the library), and the books will be perused maybe three or four times (often, notably, by parents borrowing books for their children rather than by the teenagers themselves).

The work area, where I spent the majority of my time in the library, is perhaps a rather grand description for what is essentially just a large wooden table half-covered in free newspapers and information leaflets, surrounded by six upright chairs. It is, however, the only space in the library where one can write anything or have more than one book open at any one time (provided the piles of papers are moved down to one end of the table to make room). It offered the advantage to me of being central to the whole library and affording a good view of most of the space, even if it was seldom used by any other user (primarily because few of the regulars required any space to spread out books, but also because – this being the reserved, polite suburbs – if one person was sitting at the desk, no-one else would join them and intrude unless it was absolutely necessary).

Finally, the settee area (by far the most popular spot for the regulars) consists of a settee and coffee table near the issue desk but also offers the important advantage of being the place where the local paper is kept. The only paper stocked at Llancarreg (apart from those which were free) is the daily local tabloid, which is always well-thumbed by the regulars; the library used to stock national newspapers, but desisted a few years previously after realising that they

were often left unread.

As for the books themselves, these are stored around the perimeter of the room on two low-level shelves affixed to the wall, and on larger shelving units in the middle of the room on castors which can be moved around (but which never were during the period of the research) or on circular carousels to allow for easy browsing. As has been mentioned already, the units are used to divide up the space of the library as well as to store books. To give an indication of the number and type of books available, of the 4500 or so adult fiction books available, there are around 250 horror novels, roughly 250 science fiction and about 1000 literary fiction novels. There are also over 300 Mills & Boon romance novels (although the relative size and thickness of them means they took up very little shelf space). As well as these, there are large print books, audio books, videos and DVDs, study guides, children's books, teen books, biographies/autobiographies and a large selection of self-help, reference and non-fiction books.

In the past, the perimeter shelving units extended much higher up the walls than they do now, allowing storage space for more books, with those higher up the wall accessible by means of a stepladder on castors. If the same methods were still used, it could even be possible, at a rough calculation, to double the number of books in the library. However, disability legislation has meant that the perimeter shelving is limited to its lower height below window level.

In this description of the library site, I have deliberately not discussed the 'backstage area' behind the issue desk which is reserved for staff use. I have taken the view that the focus of the research is on the public space itself, and therefore the non-public area is not material to the data. By way of clarification, however, the area consisted of a staff room, a book storage room (for books awaiting repair or collection) and a toilet. Like most users of the branch, I never saw the area for myself, and my only knowledge of it comes from what staff told me. My focus was on the activity and people in the branch, and it is to this subject that I will now turn.

4.3: The people at Llancarreg

If there is a heroine in the story of Llancarreg Library (or at least a central participant), then it is Clarrie, the Community Librarian who runs the branch and who is central to the daily life of the library. Clarrie is in her late 30s, and is the *de facto* head of two branches – one at Llancarreg, and one in a nearby suburb which is generally thought to be more self-sufficient, with more regular staff and shorter opening hours. The majority of her time is therefore spent in Llancarreg, with the occasional visit (sometimes for an hour, but occasionally for a whole day) to check up on life at her other branch.

Her outlook on life, the library and the people she meets is resolutely and unshakeably jovial, and the vigour with which she approaches her work is striking. Although her passion for libraries is shared by many other staff members, her enthusiasm is often attributed by colleagues to not having been in her job for long enough to share a cynicism of the service. Clarrie qualified as a librarian over twenty years ago, but spent nearly fifteen years working (unhappily, ultimately) for a major bank before being made redundant and returning to her original vocation. Her qualifications and her management experience meant she was able to enter the library service at a relatively senior level – something which partly accounts for her colleagues' wariness of her.

Clarrie took on her role at Llancarreg just a few weeks into the fieldwork and was only too happy to share her thoughts on the library service, the branch, the staff and library users. Initially, Clarrie's attitude towards me was somewhat wary – my presence in the branch had been agreed with her predecessor, and whilst she had said she was happy for me to remain in the branch, it took a few weeks before she seemed entirely comfortable with me being there and asking questions of 'her' users. Ultimately, we got more friendly after meeting up by chance at a two-day conference held by the chartered institute of librarians (CILIP) and learning more about each other's background and interests, and from then on Clarrie was nothing other than helpful and accommodating. Perhaps understandably, she was cautious about revealing too much to me until she had seen evidence of my interest in her profession and my commitment to understanding and representing the challenges faced by the staff and users in her

branch.

The 'Community' part of her 'Community Librarian' title⁴⁸ seemed to have a particular resonance for her, and in those first few months she worked vigorously to make allies within the branch (amongst users particularly) to get a feel for the library and the area so she could enhance the library's local reputation.

Her initial attitude to her new job was concerned with trying to make a difference to the area by changing, improving and adding to the services on offer at the library. She pursued this aim with vigour, constantly ringing up her line manager, Laura, with ideas and suggestions for new activities, changes to the library's layout and ways to promote the library to locals. Within a couple of months, however, it became apparent that few of her ideas had been given the green light, and Clarrie became a little more introspective and reticent about sharing her ideas with anyone further up the library management chain.

Despite these early setbacks, her attitude to the library users remains unshakeable. From her vantage point behind the issue desk, Clarrie sees nearly all of the library (apart from the computer area and one seldom-used sofa located in the teen zone in the far corner). This panoptical advantage allows Clarrie to greet users into the library with a cheery 'Hullo' and to offer help to anyone in need of assistance. In Clarrie's mind, being constantly available is all part of the service. The benefit is not felt by all library users, some of whom feel that she watches over them at all times and scrutinises their activities. By the same token, her enthusiasm is occasionally met by a tacit scepticism by some users, who are suspicious of her cheeriness, wondering whether it belies what Black & Crann refer to as "a smokescreen for detachment... 'the false bonhomie of shop assistants'" (2002: 155).

Clarrie's chief passion in the library is improving the service offered to

⁴⁸ Black & Muddiman (1997) have written at length about the title 'Community Librarian', its chequered history and the significance of the term. Their work will be referred to in more detail elsewhere.

children. She has no children of her own, but seems to have a natural ability for communicating with Llancarreg's younger users. In the same way that she greets every adult user, she always makes a point of talking to the children who use the library – something which cannot be said of all of the other staff. In particular, her knowledge of the children's collection in the library is first rate, and she will always make a recommendation for a similar title or author to any child returning a book. This is all the more noticeable because, in contrast, Clarrie's knowledge of the adult collection is more limited; she freely admits to not being a great reader since working in the library (something she attributes to not having the time to read⁴⁹). Yet she makes a great effort to know about children's authors and to read reviews of new material so she can point the younger readers in the right direction to literature which she thinks they will enjoy.

Clarrie's daily life in the library is split roughly evenly between stacking books, serving users (or 'customers' as she prefers to call them - a distinction which will be explored in Chapter 7) and speaking on the phone to other staff members around the city. This final task generally happens under the pretext of addressing staff shortages – a problem which occurs with such regularity that Llancarreg is generally served by one member of staff rather than the two it should have, in order that gaps elsewhere can be covered. This very real and frustrating problem is one which Clarrie generally approaches with calmness; any absences reported to her for attention are met with stoicism rather than anger, and she then starts the process of ringing other branches to find replacements – during which she engages in quite long and jolly chats with other staff about pieces of gossip or, frequently, taking an opportunity to grumble cattily about 'Management' in general and Laura in particular.

Laura is Clarrie's boss at the library, and her influence over the branch is strong enough (and her appearances frequent enough) that she is a constant thorn in Clarrie's side. The two are roughly the same age, but Laura's seniority and her slightly brusque manner irritates Clarrie considerably. What Laura sees as helpful

⁴⁹ This attitude was surprisingly common amongst library staff, several of whom expressed an ambivalence towards reading and implied that it was not a leisure activity on which they were particularly keen.

attempts to assist the branch, Clarrie sees as interference, and the tension between the two is palpable.

Indeed, the constant presence of 'Management' as a whole is an albatross around Clarrie's neck; a persistent set of hazards to be negotiated or avoided. Whether setting up a small activity in the library without Laura's knowledge or anguishing over submitting the latest batch of lending statistics, Clarrie's telephone references to 'Management' attest to the level of supervision under which she operates. In particular, the lending statistics at Llancarreg, and their continuing decline, trouble Clarrie and fuel her anxiety that she hasn't been successful yet in her job. Once again, Laura plays a role in this, reminding Clarrie of 'the figures' on a regular basis. The monthly management meeting where Clarrie has to go and account for the consistent slippage is preceded by several days' worth of anguished telephone calls to other Community Librarians in similar situations as each tries to share advice and excuses.

This bureaucratic hurdle, however, does not completely dampen Clarrie's enthusiasm. Much of her day-to-day work with the public is full of interaction and enjoyment, and her relationship with many of her colleagues underlines her cheerful, friendly nature. Her professional life is therefore a dichotomy between an enthusiasm for users and a sceptical mistrust of management – not an unusual state of affairs for a middle-ranking public official (see Lipsky, 1980), and certainly not amongst Clarrie's colleagues. In that respect at least, she is a typical Community Librarian in the traditional sense (Black & Muddiman, 1997): dedicated and committed but suspicious of a perceived interference from above in how she carries out her work.

Alongside Clarrie, the two other most regular staff members are Mark (an affable, happy-go-lucky library assistant in his late twenties) and Molly (a part-time library assistant with nearly forty years' service at the local authority, who is well-respected amongst staff and users alike, and whose matriarchal manner means she is particularly good with the children who came to the branch). Between them, the three operate the branch most days of the week, theoretically with two on duty at any one time but, in practice, usually with Clarrie working

alone while one of the others covers an absence elsewhere. All three, over the course of the data collection, were happy to talk about anything relating to the library and were extremely helpful in explaining how the branch was run. Moreover, all three (but Clarrie and Molly in particular) are chatty with nearly all the users who came into the library and it was largely because of them that the issue desk remained a hub of social activity during my time at the branch.

There is, however, a great deal more to the social heartbeat of Llancarreg than just the staff members. The regulars who come to the library every week keep it a viable institution – not just through borrowing enough items to make the library worth opening, but also by giving it a social role. As was mentioned earlier, many of these regulars played a pivotal role in keeping the library open when it was threatened with closure, so they have a place in the branch as both protectors and as users. They feel that the library as an institution is meaningfully ‘theirs’ because of their efforts to save it, and as such are stakeholders in a real sense (as opposed to the slightly clichéd and jargonistic way in which the word is occasionally used in policy circles).

Those that are referred to in the following chapters as ‘regulars’ are not an organised or orchestrated group in any formal sense. There are some regulars who are on more familiar terms than others, but for the most part the regulars at Llancarreg library are no different to the streetcorner men witnessed by Liebow:

There is nothing to join, no obligations, no one to say whether you belong or do not belong. Some of the men have never spoken to some of the others beyond exchanging a casual greeting. Some are close friends, some do not like others, and still others consider themselves enemies. But each man comes here... to see ‘what’s happening’ and to pass the time. (Liebow, 1967: 22/3)

Apart from the notable difference that the Llancarreg regulars draw roughly equally from men and from women, the same description holds true. The label of some of the Llancarreg users as ‘regulars’ is purely one of convenience on my part to denote those users whose presence in the branch was sufficiently frequent that I began to recognise them over time. This was generally mirrored by the fact that Clarrie and her colleagues would also recognise the same people – although

in their case they had the advantage of knowing the person's name and borrowing history whenever they scanned out a book on their behalf. The 'regulars' described below, therefore, were by and large those who came to the branch at least every couple of weeks and, more often than not, spoke to other users or library staff (or to me) and in doing so became 'known faces'.

The only loose affiliations which can be identified – and they are very loose – would be along the following four lines. The retired regulars are the most frequent visitors and have the most evident social bonds; this group centres particularly around Reg and his Monday morning gang who will be described later. The mothers and children are the next largest group, appearing for the most part on Monday mornings for the storytime session, but also at other points during the week, especially in the mid-afternoon period on the way back from school. The next largest group are the workers – people with jobs who come to the branch either on the Monday evening late opening or on the Saturday; these users have jobs and come to the library to borrow light reading and their trips are very businesslike – coming in, browsing for what they want, and then leaving. The final group is the small band of users who come to access the computers to search and apply for jobs or to use the library's book stock to learn work-related skills; this group only consists of maybe half a dozen users, but their patterns of use are significantly different to the others insofar as they use the branch for 'serious' purposes rather than for leisure pursuits.

The extent to which members of these groups socialise and interact varies markedly. For the workers and the IT users, evidence of social interaction is minimal, but for the retired regulars and the mothers, the social element of their library use is more apparent. The retired regulars in particular use the branch as a primarily (although not exclusively) social setting.

The most boisterous of this group is Reg, a retired car mechanic who has lived in Llanccarreg for most of his life – he was born in 'upper Llan' and grew up in the village before joining the merchant navy. He returned to 'lower Llan' in the late 1960s to live in a modest terraced house two minutes' walk from the library with his wife, Betty, whose quiet demeanour contrasts starkly with that of her

husband. If there is a 'life and soul of the library', it is undoubtedly Reg. His visits to the library are more frequent, more intense and create more work for the library staff than any other user – but despite this (and partly because of it too), he is a welcome visitor. A ferocious reader, Reg has over the years consumed all he wants of Llanccarreg's book stock (almost single-handedly keeping its lending statistics healthy for several lean years), so now spends his days flicking through the local paper on the sofa by the coffee table, or occasionally tinkering with the computers and asking endless streams of technical questions to staff. Betty, meanwhile, dutifully accompanies her husband to the library on each and every visit but rarely stays for as long, opting instead to leave him to his own devices and give herself some respite at home.

Reg's own view of his library use is that he has become an integral part of the library furniture – he is a resource like the books, the computers, the CDs, DVDs and newspapers, available to the other users who have a need for the knowledge he can impart. As with any resource, some users find the information available useful and engaging, whilst others find it less helpful – but some of those in the former category return to the source time and time again. For example, Reg's experience as a car mechanic and all-round expert on motors and engines makes him a first port of call for many Llanccarreg residents who hear that the old man at the library can generally diagnose a car problem and suggest where to get it mended and how much one should pay for the privilege.

The staff view of Reg is more varied. Clarrie and Reg get on famously, but the younger library staff, particularly Mark, keep a bit more of a distance for fear of being burdened with complex requests or kept from their work by Reg's animated chatter. Nonetheless, Reg's open and friendly nature often makes him a welcome distraction, and his place within the library hierarchy is a kind of link between staff and users – he relays bits of feedback and suggestions to Clarrie (most of which she ignores) and offers the older users the opportunity of a chat when Clarrie is too busy to speak with users as much as she might otherwise like.

Indeed, Reg is the linchpin of the older users, marshalling the Monday morning informal meet-up amongst Llanccarreg's retired community, checking up

on the health of the non-attendees and keeping everyone abreast of important local developments. He is not alone in doing this but his status as the alpha male amongst the regulars is unchallenged.

His 'gang' consists of about a dozen or so other retired regulars, aged for the most part between 65 and 85, of whom maybe half will turn up at the library on a Monday morning for a chat and to borrow or return books at the same time. The fact that the gang use the library as their chosen 'base' is not without significance. It was this group who successfully fought against the branch's closure in the early 1990s, and they consider the library to be 'theirs', with some justification – they have seen dozens of library staff come and go, but the gang have remained a constant in the library's evolution. Many of them speak of the library, and treat it, like an extension of their own homes – it is somewhere to relax and be comfortable, but also somewhere to maintain and respect.

Beyond Reg's gang, Llancarreg has another seventy or so users who are regulars at the branch – generally this means that they came to the library on a sufficiently regular basis that Clarrie knows them to speak to socially. They make up the core of Llancarreg's borrowers, although Clarrie intimated that there were nearly a thousand registered local users 'on the books' (by which she means that around that number have borrowed items from the branch in the past year).

Aside from the indistinct groups already outlined, there are a large number of library patrons who cannot be pinned down by age, gender or type of use. Indeed, they underline that library use is significantly varied, and it is these (often infrequent) users who have the most difficult and unexpected requests for staff. Between the small groups, the loose affiliations and the unattached users, what arises in the library is a social rhythm and structure in which all users play a small part, regardless of whether or not they interact with their other users or fit into any arbitrary category. It is that social rhythm, and the interaction of users, which will now be explored in greater detail.

4.4: The social rhythms of Llancarreg library

Describing a typical day at Llancarreg is a complicated task – on the one hand, no day is precisely like any other, whilst on the other hand, some of the routines which occur every day are so similar and banal that at first glance they barely warrant an explanation. However, both the routines and the more out-of-the-ordinary events contribute towards the ambience of Llancarreg, and it is this contrast which makes the public library a complex arena worthy of study.

I will aim in this section to give a snapshot of some of the more important and recurring elements of library life. In doing so, I hope to further illustrate the space itself and the people who occupy it and provide a context for the analysis in later chapters. As the previous sections have alluded to, the branch can at times be a social hub which is home to an active and sociable community, with an ongoing hive of activity taking place at the issue desk. At other times, however, the atmosphere is more reserved and the library is a quiet, businesslike workplace with staff and users concentrating on their own individual tasks.

By far the busiest and rowdiest extreme of library life occurs on a Monday morning when the weekly storytime session for children takes place in the library. On that day, the mothers – and it is almost without exception mothers rather than fathers who attend – arrive in the library shortly before 10.30. The session is actually meant to start at 10am, but the later start time is a happy compromise which benefits both users and staff. Clarrie believes that by starting later than planned, users will spend time browsing the shelves to borrow more books (and in doing so boost the issue figures) or registering their children as library users (which, again, improves the branch's performance against various indicators); the mothers, however, leave home a little later or take a little longer on the walk to the library and then spend extra time chatting with each other. The occasional book issue or registration makes Clarrie feel that her idea has been vindicated, and the later start time is welcomed by the mothers, who get to spend more time socialising, which is often the main reason for the visit in the first place.

Storytime has a symbolic importance both for the educational role it provides to the children and for the social function it fulfils for the mothers. The

age range of the children varies (and my own ability to estimate childrens' ages is particularly poor), but most of the children who attend could reasonably be described as toddlers, although the occasional optimistic mother might bring a baby in a pram or a buggy. Staff are good-natured, enthusiastic and energetic, asking questions and pointing out what is going on in the pictures for the benefit of their audience. The children sit, for the most part, cross-legged on the floor while their mothers perch slightly more precariously either on the childrens' chairs or table in the middle of the 'zone'. Often, a stray child will leave the pack and go for a walk around the library, picking up books and putting them down again and shouting across the room to the others – all of which is generally treated with good grace by the staff and the other parents, although not always necessarily by other library users.

The real action begins when the stories (usually the staff member will read two or three short stories in one session) finish and the staff member goes back behind the issue desk. The mothers continue to occupy the same space, initially by reading quietly to their own children or helping them to pick out books to take home. Soon, however, they are chatting with each other and the volume of the conversation gradually rises. It becomes increasingly apparent to anyone watching that the dominant conversations are not between the children, but between the mothers. This is often done through the guise of talking to the children ostensibly, but in actual fact eliciting information from the other mother ("What did your mummy get you for Christmas?", "What are you doing today?").

This says as much about the nature of the suburban community as it does about the library. The more reserved, younger generation of residents have few chances to interact, so events like the storytime sessions offer an outlet to get to know one another which a more traditional pattern of library use (entering, returning, browsing, borrowing and leaving) might not be able to provide. In many cases, these residents moved to Llanccarreg because of its handiness as a suburban commuter hub and because it is a pleasant environment in which to raise a family; comparatively few have grown up in the area with a cohort of friends and acquaintances, and the library therefore offers one location to get to know their fellow residents. Parents of school-age children may chat with other parents

at the school gates, but for the parents of young toddlers, the storytime session offers a local, free and open environment in which to meet new acquaintances.

The same is not quite true for the participants in the weekly IT class which takes place on Thursday mornings. These library users are often from an older demographic and in many cases have lived in Llancarreg for many years or even a lifetime. Nevertheless, the IT class shares the qualities of being a local, free and open environment for social interaction, and again it is an important part of the library's social rhythm.

The class itself is a basic introduction to information technology and the internet, with the main 'pupils' of the class being existing regulars. Each week, a class of two or three are given a few basic tasks to familiarise themselves with a new element of the course, and are given handouts so they can practice on their home computer if they have one. The routines of the class are not dissimilar to that of storytime – the important, underlying backdrop to the class is one of gentle conversation between participants which ensures that the class has as much of a social feel to it as an educative one. Much like the storytime session, the participants will take any opportunity to have a chat unrelated to the activity of the day, and the class is usually followed by a sustained period of gossip between the participants.

The third and final organised activity in the branch which makes it noticeably busier and noisier is the monthly-ish reading group who meet in the branch. The group is a loose affiliation of regulars from Llancarreg and friends of those regulars (and friends of those friends), comprising of approximately ten women, most of whom live in or near Llancarreg. The group suffers from having a lack of leadership, which has culminated in the past in meetings not being arranged or publicised, or books not being procured in time for the meeting. Nevertheless, Clarrie's attempts to keep the group going for the benefit of the branch has culminated in her taking on much of the administrative responsibilities of the group – she now organises the meetings and rings the group members to remind them, and gently directs the group towards choosing books which she will be able to easily source through the library service. The group has therefore

become a more regular fixture in the branch's scenery, sometimes meeting in the branch (rather than in one of the group members' homes). The books they read are frequently popular bestsellers, and the critiques they offer of them are often quite superficial, but the very fact that the group has been formed and sustained demonstrates a success on Clarrie's part to keep the group operating despite only a limited enthusiasm even from those involved.

There is, however, much more to the social rhythm of the library than these organised activities. Indeed, the majority of social action in the library happens entirely separately from any orchestrated events. The most obvious example of this would be the regular meet-ups of Reg and his gang, the noise and vibrancy of which regularly outstrips anything produced by the storytime session or the IT class. Reg's gang meet up throughout the week at various times depending on what the most prominent members have planned, but the most regular slot is on a Monday morning following the storytime group. On those mornings, the gang will begin to arrive at the branch and congregate. This is frequently done initially along gender lines, with the men meeting up at the coffee table area in the middle of the branch to share the local paper and sit on the sofa, and the women assembling by the romance and fiction shelves. This is not an unusual situation – it is extremely common for couples to arrive in the branch and for the woman to browse the shelves while their husbands flick through the paper and wait for them to finish selecting books (which often includes the women picking out books for the man). For the morning regulars, the meeting points are well-established, and allow the group of women to engage in some book talk (recommending titles or authors) and the men to put the world to rights over the stories of the day in the newspaper.

Gradually, however, the groups conflate into a huddle around the coffee table area, and ten or twenty minutes of gossip ensues. Depending on the day of the week and the weather outside, the number of users taking part might vary from three or four to seven or eight, all drawn from a pool of a dozen or so core regulars. The conversation varies, but the most regular topics involve the health and illnesses of members of the group (and particularly the swapping of complaints about long waits for operations and consultant's appointments), the

cost of living and news stories from that day's local paper.

These informal gatherings account for the most significant proportion of social interaction in the branch, and smaller versions of them happen every day between users. The sight of two or more individuals chatting in the library is a very common one and forms part of the branch's 'libraryness' in offering a space for such interactions. Sometimes this might involve chance encounters between users, or it may be the result of a planned meeting because the library represents a convenient location to catch up. Often, staff will also play their part in such exchanges, chipping in with a comment, observation or joke if the conversation allows. The library is not always a hotbed of social interaction, but these exchanges take place with sufficient regularity for them to be a noticeable and important part of library life. The noise and vitality of such exchanges is partly what makes the branch a welcoming environment, and this noise is not without its significance (as Chapter 6 will explore in greater depth).

Even when the library is empty of users, there is a constant background hubbub of noise and activity. For one thing, the bleeping of the barcode machine continues throughout the day as books are scanned and added to the trolley for filing. The rickety trolley with the squeaky wheel is then pushed around the library to replace books on the shelves. Another staff member might flick on the kettle in the back room, which also adds to the volume. The telephone on the issue desk will ring and start the usual half hour of "playing musical chairs" (as Clarrie puts it) as staff are relocated to other branches to cover shortages.

Other sounds become a regular and accepted part of the library environment. Users in the IT zone will tap away at computer keyboards; a regular will rustle the pages of the newspaper on the coffee table; a teenager's mobile phone will chirrup the arrival of a text message; someone will surreptitiously unwrap a sweet; someone's iPod music will clack away through headphones. All these sounds rather debunk the stereotype of a silent, hushed library watched over by a strict librarian. Some practices such as talking on a mobile phone or listening to music may be frowned upon by staff and users, but it is a rare thing indeed to see anyone rebuked for it; if it happens at all, it is usually by another library user

rather than by a staff member.

With this backdrop of noise, the library continues to operate throughout the day, ebbing and flowing. Users continue to arrive and potter around the library, endlessly repeating the pattern of returning, browsing and borrowing, maybe pausing to chat occasionally with each other or with the staff member on duty. The tapping of keyboards over in the IT corner also signals ongoing activity – users checking e-mails, typing letters or CVs, or browsing through holiday destinations. This reassuring hum of activity in the library is indicative of the most positive conceptualisation of a branch's 'libraryness' – a welcoming, relaxing, public environment where anyone can walk in from the street and engage in leisure or learning, free of charge and free from restriction. Of course, Llanccarreg is not always this idyllic, and many of the vignettes in the following chapters will examine some of the ways in which this tableau is regularly challenged and undermined. It is worth reflecting at this stage, however, that the largely positive representation of Llanccarreg outlined above does exist in sustained snapshots throughout the working day, and is no less fair a portrayal than the more gloomy picture hinted at in the vignette which began the chapter.

4.5: Conclusions

This chapter has provided a detailed description of the research site, introduced some of the people who use it and outlined the routines and rhythms which make the public library an interesting public space to social researchers. It has also started to indicate some of the sociological issues within the site which are at stake. In some cases these take the form of conflicts and tensions which are problematic for the library service in seeking to fulfil its policy objectives; in other cases, these are more positive attributes which demonstrate the successful elements of the public library as an institution.

Contained within this descriptive account of the setting is material which engages with the themes outlined in Chapter 1 about how users use a branch library, how policy has an impact on front-line services, how ideals such as community and engagement are manifested in everyday library life and how

competing demands have to be met. In particular, this chapter has started to tease out some elements of a branch which form a conceptualisation of 'libraryness'. Many of these will be developed further in the chapters which follow, and include such ideals as: the inherent sociability of the library space but also its tranquillity; its role in providing a civic and cultural landmark in which users can discuss issues of the day and access information which is of interest to them; the library is also a versatile location onto which users can project their own set of values and principles by adopting different patterns of use.

On the other side of the coin, some of the more problematic elements of the public library have been identified. The performance indicators and audit practices which are used to measure library performance have been mentioned, and I have indicated the degree of resentment which some front-line staff attach to them. I have also discussed IT provision in the branch; a relatively recent introduction to conceptualisations of a public library's role, and one which causes a degree of disagreement over how that role should be manifested. Similarly, the extent to which the branch presents and markets itself have been mentioned as contested issues within the setting.

The next three chapters will unpick these themes more analytically by providing detailed data in the form of fieldnote extracts which explain how these issues are played out in an everyday setting. The importance of these fieldnotes is central to the research and its findings – this chapter has outlined some of the central themes of the research and provided a description of how they appear within the Llancarreg branch, but it is in the detailed fieldnotes where these can be seen more clearly at first-hand. The fieldnote data provides detailed, objective accounts of library life, and exploring and analysing these fieldnotes allows conclusions to be drawn about what happens in a library and what it says about society at large. These extracts will also therefore be juxtaposed with policy documents and relevant academic literatures to explore how policy ambitions are played out at ground level and to demonstrate the changing and often conflicting roles of the modern library service.

With the research setting now described and the themes and people within

it outlined, we can now turn our attention to the more critical analysis of the people and practices of Llancarreg library. The next chapter will commence this process by attending to the staff and work practices of the branch and, in particular, the means by which the library service measures its output and success.

5. The audit regime of a public library: what counts? what gets counted?

This is the first of three chapters which looks in detail at the everyday challenges and contestations faced in the social arena of the public branch library. This chapter specifically focuses on the library staff and some of the working practices which guided their everyday experiences of life in the setting. A branch library, like any other public service, has its own set of guidelines, diktats, measures and targets which direct front-line staff and influence its day-to-day operation. It also has its own distinctive bureaucratic structures and systems which have a direct impact on the services which are offered and which shape users' experiences of the library.

In this chapter, my aim is to outline some of the main organisational frameworks which were part of the daily routines of the branch and illustrate how these practices affected the service which library users received. Earlier chapters and the stated research questions in Chapter 1 made reference to the cultural and social aspirations of the library service; this chapter starts to unpack those aspirations a little further and in particular show how they are measured and assessed. In doing so, I hope to say something about the wider influence of audit culture (Maguire, Shore & Wright, 2001; Power, 1994, 1997; Shore & Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000) on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) and to contribute towards those literatures by offering a detailed ethnographic analysis of one such public setting.

Audit culture has become synonymous with conceptualisations of neo-liberal governance and of the modern public state. The “outcomes rhetoric” (Smyth & Dow, 1998: 292) of the (then) New Labour era is now familiar within and beyond the sphere of education. The term itself, however, is frustratingly imprecise:

...the ambiguity of auditing is not just a methodological problem but a substantive fact... the word is not used simply descriptively to refer to particular practices, but normatively in the context of demands and

aspirations for accountability and control. (Power, 1997: 6, original emphasis)

It is this element of control in particular which is at stake in this chapter; to understand the audit cultures at play in the public library is to understand who is controlling the service, for whom and to what effect. The process of audit only reveals something superficial – the effect of audit says something much more meaningful about power, trust and the strategic direction of the service in question.

The presence of bureaucracy and time-consuming administrative procedures within the public sector, and staff complaints about them, are not a new phenomenon. Within the library sector, there is particular concern over the effectiveness of lending statistics as a measure of a branch's (or local authority's) success in promoting library use, with some critics (Black & Crann, 2002; Toyne & Usherwood, 2001) arguing that such measurements are unhelpful in reflecting the service's true roles. The issue of staff autonomy and the ability of front-line staff to make decisions is also an area of debate, with front-line staff sometimes seen as having less authority over 'their' branches than their professional status might merit (Berry, 1998; Black, 2000; Mullins & Linehan, 2005; Olorunsola, 2000). What follows in this chapter is a local example of a wider issue which helps to situate the debate in an everyday context as well as underlining some of the nuances which were specific to the branch at Llancarreg.

The presence of audit culture and bureaucratic apparatus on public services is significant on a wider level as well. Chapter 2 made reference to the difficulty of measuring outputs of informal education (of which public libraries can be considered a constituent element), and the problem this presents to policy-makers when formulating strategy. For those public services concerned with educational or cultural provision, measurements of output can at times be arbitrary, where the elements which are most easily measured are not necessarily those which are fundamental to the service: "The concern with measurable outcomes of education can set about raising 'academic' standards, but at the expense of other education concerns, such as social justice issues" (Coffey, 2001: 10). With the 'colonisation' of audit culture (Power, 1997) whereby it becomes an

accepted and pervading part of an organisation, the unintended consequence may be that the elements which are most easily audited become those which come to dominate the service.

Users might only experience these audits at a superficial level, but the underlying effect on the service might be more significant. Where there are particular practices which benefit users but which are not so easily measured in audit terms, providers have to make difficult choices between satisfying superiors or service users.⁵⁰ The significance attached to statistical measures of success could result in more qualitatively significant elements of service provision being overlooked.

Within the context of this study, these difficulties are presented in stark ways. Measuring the outputs of a cultural/educative service like a library is fraught with judgements over what elements are worthy of measurement and, indeed, how best to calculate them. The previous chapter has already made reference to the social activity of a branch library which accounts for a large element of its appeal to many users, but which is difficult to quantify. It is this difficulty which will be the focus of the next two sections of this chapter; the first will outline the elements of library use which were subject to scrutiny and measurement, the second will then outline those which were not. In doing so, I hope to reveal some of the benefits and shortcomings of the audit culture of a branch library.

The chapter then moves on to explore some of the more general elements of the bureaucratic apparatus of the library by looking at staff autonomy and in particular at how staff are trusted to deal with the day-to-day running of 'their' branch. The issue of trust lies at the heart of audit culture (Power, 1994; Strathern, 2000); in this case, the freedom (or otherwise) of staff to lead and respond to the users of their branch signifies the extent to which the service is user-led or policy-led.

⁵⁰ Equating audit techniques with accountability to superiors is an over-simplification; it is perhaps fairer to say that those elements which are audited generally reflect the objectives of the management (see Lipsky, 1980).

The final substantive section of the chapter then outlines some of the ways in which the audit techniques and bureaucratic structures at Llanccarreg were subverted or circumvented by staff, and what this demonstrates.

5.1: “The dreaded figures” – what gets counted in a branch library

The following extract outlines the presence of audit culture in Llanccarreg library. Whilst not a fieldnote *per se* in that it does not describe or portray one specific event in Llanccarreg library, it is a composite of many different fieldwork observations, and revelations from participants, about the ways in which the branch compiled and used information. My purpose in using it here as a passage of extended ethnographic description⁵¹ is to give an indication of the audit practices in a typical branch library as the basis for a wider discussion about their use and effects.

A considerable amount of staff time in Llanccarreg, particularly for Clarrie as the most senior staff member in charge of the day-to-day running of the branch, focuses on compiling statistics and information for the monthly management meeting. At this meeting, Clarrie is expected to present her senior library colleagues from the local authority with what she refers to as “the dreaded figures”. These primarily detail the number of book loans (‘issues’) from the library during a given period – usually the preceding calendar month, depending on the timing of the management meeting to which they are submitted. She also, however, submits information on some of the other facets of the library – the number of attendees of the storytime session, the number of ‘pupils’ at the IT class and, most recently, the number of computer bookings.

Clarrie approaches the compiling and submission of these pieces of information with an outward sense of foreboding, frequently expressing to colleagues her anxiety about the figures and her nerves about the meeting at which they will be presented. Her principle discontent with the system is borne out of a personal frustration – despite her best efforts, issues at Llanccarreg have been falling for some time, and she has

⁵¹ Whilst this is not a fieldnote in the same sense as those which appear elsewhere in these chapters, it was written contemporaneously with the ‘raw’ fieldnotes to describe particular elements of library life at Llanccarreg. I therefore feel it is reasonable and appropriate to afford it the same status and present it as data which can be interrogated and analysed.

been unable to reverse the trend during the months she has been in charge. The regular reporting of the figures necessitates an admission on her part of a continuing professional struggle and what she considers a personal failure to improve the situation.

But the reluctance is also attributable partly to the statistics not reflecting her own personal experience of the extent of library use and user satisfaction in Llanccarreg. To Clarrie, much of the library's contribution to the local community is unquantifiable. What she perceives to be improvements to the library and its service are often left unmeasured by the official statistics and unnoticed by her superiors.

This is not without some justification. A number of the most loyal regulars at Llanccarreg (including many of Reg's gang) borrow comparatively few books, in some cases because they have read most of them already and new additions to the stock arrive infrequently. Yet the group still come to the branch on a regular basis for other reasons – they might have a read of the paper or chat with some of the other group members; activities which they enjoy (or, at least, repeat with such regularity that it must still hold some attraction), but which cannot be quantified in any obvious way.

From Clarrie's point of view, those activities represent a part of library life at Llanccarreg which is fundamental to the library's role – perhaps even a part of the branch's social inclusion agenda. Whilst Clarrie herself might not put it in such terms, some of the older regulars frequently express to her and her colleagues that they appreciate being able to meet in the library and that the Monday morning gathering is one of only a few social contacts they may have all week. The local authority expresses in its policy literature a desire to support social inclusion through its library network, and yet it does not take examples of that inclusion into consideration when calculating an individual branch's success, because it is difficult to measure in a quantitative way. Branch staff perceive this to be a flaw in the system, and often say as much to their colleagues.

This dissatisfaction with the compiling of information is also manifested in another, slightly different way in relation to the figures on computer use. The monitoring of computer use is a relatively recent measure within the local authority. Until just before the start of the fieldwork period, IT use was not calculated as part of each branch's figures, but it was added as a criteria in order that management could scrutinise computer use in each branch – partly so they could assess where to prioritise equipment upgrades, but also in order to see which users were making the most use of the facilities. This decision was apparently initially welcomed by front-line staff, who felt that one important element of the branch's provision would now be appreciated; however, that initial enthusiasm was dented shortly after when the details were provided on how that use would be measured.

At Llancarreg, as with all libraries in the local authority, any user wishing to make use of the computers has to book themselves into a 'slot', with the maximum time permitted on a computer at each library per day limited to two hours (although Clarrie is frequently more flexible about extending this, particularly on quiet days when demand is low). When booking in, the user does not have to provide their library card to make a booking – but they do have to verbally provide their post code to the librarian on duty before they can use a computer. This then allows management to get an idea of which area users are from and, by extension, make judgements about how much and how far each branch is 'reaching out', all while maintaining the principle of allowing users to walk in off the street and use the library without having to be fully signed-up members.

Despite this, many front-line staff, Clarrie included, remain uneasy about demanding such information. Part of their role, as they see it, involves protecting the right of the public to have access to knowledge, and for that access to be as unlimited and uncomplicated as possible. Library management (represented in Llancarreg most frequently by Laura) were, on the face of it, in agreement – but their need to measure library usage as accurately as possible so they could report to their own bosses and apply for extra funding necessarily compromised some of those principles. The net result for Llancarreg was a staff who felt they were snooping by asking computer users for their post codes,⁵² or analysing individual user's lending details, whilst management felt they had no option but to persist with a system which gave them the only form of measurement which would be acceptable for the purposes of funding applications.

This extract provides an introduction to the systems of measurement and audit at Llancarreg as well as hinting towards the underlying tensions which existed around those practices between front-line staff and library management.⁵³ In its most simple sense, the audit systems in place for the library network in Llancarreg's local authority were heavily based around quantitative measures of

⁵² It is perhaps worth adding a note to the effect that very few users explicitly objected to being asked for this information – the more typical reaction on being asked was surprise and puzzlement as to why this information was required rather than any resistance to providing it.

⁵³ I should add a short note on my use of, and understanding of, the term 'management' which recurs throughout this chapter. I have used the term in much the same way that the staff at Llancarreg use it – to refer to their superiors within the library service who were not front-line staff members. The distinction is a somewhat arbitrary one, not least because some members of 'management' (such as Laura) would occasionally work a shift in a branch library rather than working in a council office. However, in the minds of the front-line staff this distinction was important because in their eyes it denoted how those at the coalface were more frequently and more deeply in touch with day-to-day running whilst 'management' were more distant from the realities of everyday library life.

book issues, with some additional measurements (again, quantitative) of participants in core library activities such as IT classes and storytime sessions.⁵⁴ This type of system is typical across the library spectrum (Black & Crann, 2002; Davies, 2008; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; McMenemy, 2007; Toyne & Usherwood, 2001). As an instrument to measure library usage in a raw sense, that approach is not without its benefits – the lending of books is a well-understood and well-recognised element of the public library's remit, so measuring the number of books lent out in a particular branch does demonstrate its relative performance in one important area. Equally, counting the number of users taking part in its core community activities provides a marker for how many of its users are engaged with the organised activities within the branch. Where the system comes in for criticism is that beyond the organised activities and the formal uses of a library is another layer of social and cultural activity which is harder to quantify.

The quantitative information which is gathered at branch level is fed to the local authority's library management, who can build up a picture of which branches are busier (in terms of book issues and activities, at least) and allocate resources accordingly. The information is also used to demonstrate compliance with the Public Library Standards which apply for the given area – for Llancarreg, these were the Welsh Public Library Standards (CyMAL, 2008b); equivalent standards with differing titles apply in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Particularly relevant standards to branch use would include calculating the number of people using the public library service during the year per thousand resident population (Standard F 3. WPLPI 2 (i) – CyMAL, 2008b: 43) and the number of people attending events and activities organised by the branch per thousand resident population (Standard F 3. WPLPI 2 (ii) – CyMAL, 2008b: 43). In turn, this information would be used to highlight areas which were lacking in

⁵⁴ The number of library members in the local authority was also a key figure for management, as were the number of new members joining in each branch. When I joined the library myself during the research period, I joined in the busier Central Library rather than Llancarreg – a decision which I came to regret once I realised the 'lost business' this meant for Clarrie and her colleagues. Joining the library seemed an obvious step to take at an early stage in the fieldwork, as it allowed me to participate in library life as a user (borrowing books and CDs from the branch, reserving items from elsewhere and – to my shame – incurring fines for late returns). It also helped me to relate better to other library users by showing that, in this respect at least, I was 'one of them' rather than an alien outsider.

their library provision, and to assist government at a central, regional and local level to allocate targeted funding to improve the service.

There is an important discrepancy to be noted here about how such statistics are treated. On the one hand, importance is attached by government (locally, regionally and nationally) to compliance with Public Library Standards. As Davies (2008) notes, these standards are the most prominent means by which local authorities can demonstrate good performance amongst their libraries and there is pressure to comply with them. However, when it comes to allocating resources for specific projects, government is more likely to assist authorities which are struggling to meet those standards. For example, government might provide funding towards the opening of a new branch, or allocate extra money to extend opening hours. There is some debate, therefore, about whether meeting performance indicators is ultimately a help or a hindrance to improving local services.

The central tenet of the standards, however, remains constant – the aim being to improve the library service, and check progress by assessing whether objective targets are being met – as well as indicating whether services are providing value for money (Goulding, 2006a). In this sense, the systems in place at Llancarreg did serve a clear purpose, and indeed this was understood by staff at a ground level. Moreover, this type of audit system – checking local progress against nationally-set criteria to allow resources to be directed to the right place – is not unfamiliar within the context of New Labour’s audit culture (Giddens, 2000; Newman, 2001; Strathern, 2000). Nevertheless, the system attracted criticism from staff – and, indirectly from users – not just for its bureaucracy, but also for its effects on the library as a cultural institution. It is to these criticisms that attention will now be turned.

5.2: “What doesn’t get counted – but does count”

Where the audit regime outlined above arguably failed to be successful was that it lacked support from front-line staff. Whilst they may have appreciated its intentions, their daily interaction with the library and its users was – in their eyes

– something which could not be easily quantified. Indeed, what was at stake in some of their exchanges over the role of statistics was a much more fundamental issue about the library's place within its community. In this respect, the Community Librarians (such as Clarrie) were standing up for their historical, ideological role (Black & Muddiman, 1997) to make the library user-orientated and responsive to expectations of 'libraryness' rather than to conform to more contemporary expectations around quality control.

As far as many staff were concerned, the most valuable work done by the library for its users frequently went unnoticed. As Mark put it:

"If I spend a whole morning helping an old dear use the computer or reading to some of the kids, I know I've done a good morning's work, but the bosses don't have a clue [that it has taken place]. It's like the old joke – 'working hard here is like wetting yourself in a dark suit; it makes you feel warm, but nobody notices!'... These things don't get counted, but that's not to say they don't count for something." (Mark, junior librarian)

It was not just a desire to have good work noticed which caused Mark and his colleagues to be reticent about issue statistics as the measure of the branch's success. It was a belief, borne out by the 'everyday slog' of working in a generally poorly-paid public service (see Coates, 2004; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; Leadbeater, 2002) that the most meaningful elements of their day, the experiences and incidents which most validated their work, involved elements of human contact and interaction which could not be (and were not) calculated. There is nothing new about a divergence of priorities whereby front-line staff value different elements of their profession from their superiors; Lipsky noted the "distinct degree of noncompliance if lower-level workers' interests differ from the interests of those at higher levels" (1980: 17). While there was little evidence at Llancarreg of the staff's frustration translating into noncompliance with the audit procedures, the underlying disparity between what staff felt validated their work and what management recognised as important was clearly evident

This was also partly apparent in what front-line staff felt to be inconsistencies within the various statistical gauges used to measure performance:

“A user who comes in to use the computers to go on a social networking site [like Facebook or MySpace] boosts our statistics, but social networking in the ‘old school’ way – Reg and his gang chatting together – won’t get picked up. Why count one but not the other?”
(Mark, junior librarian)

This point, in fact, is crucial – saying as it does something not just about the shortcomings of audit techniques, but also about the library service’s sometimes inconsistent approach to technology. Chapter 7 will look at the role of computers in the branch; here, it is simply worth noting that the official yardsticks of library performance privileged IT-based activities without affording equivalent treatment to their low-tech equivalents. For a service which is heavily dependent on older users (Hawkins *et al*, 2001), this discrepancy is certainly surprising, and arguably fails to do justice to the activities of many of its regular users.

For staff members like Mark, the systems in place overlooked the more worthy elements of the librarian’s role as well as taking a myopic view of the multitudinous social facets of the library. The daily social contacts which validated Mark’s work (and that of his colleagues) were, to him, the most important element of his profession. Such episodes occurred with unambiguous regularity during the research at Llancarreg – a fact mirrored by their frequency within the fieldnote data. The events themselves are trivial, even banal; but they made staff feel they were providing a public service which went above and beyond the simple providing, ordering, filing and categorising of books. They also provided users with a level of assistance which might not have been so easily (or as gladly) provided elsewhere.

One day, this might have involved Mark exchanging an elderly regular’s small change for a bank note. Another, it may have meant Clarrie choosing to overlook a fine on a book which a teenage ‘occasional’ had neglected to return before she went on holiday. It might have been Molly, in her grandmotherly way, allowing two children who had just joined the library to stamp their own books when they were issued, or helping a mother pick out some reading for her ill 11-year-old son who was stuck in bed with the ‘flu. Even the most prosaic things –

staff just chatting to a user about whether they had enjoyed a book they were returning, making polite small talk about the weather or checking up on the health of a regular whose attendance at the library had been less frequent than usual – added up to making the library more than just a receptacle of books and librarians more than just administrators.

To staff, these occurrences were everyday, both literally and figuratively – they happened with such regularity that they became the norm, but they also were never taken for granted by the staff, who used them to offer a cheery punctuation to what was in many other respects a monotonous job. As everyday examples of ‘libraryness’, they are important and worthwhile instances of the qualitative elements of provision which were valued by users.

It was this discrepancy between the social importance of the library and the lack of attention paid to it within the prevailing audit culture which jaded the staff’s view of some of the library procedures. Their time, they felt, would have been better spent doing more of the ‘value-added’ library work outlined above – spending time with users, helping them with their needs and building up relationships with them. For the staff members who felt most strongly about the library as a learning environment rather than a recreational one, this was seen as by far the most appealing way to improve the branch’s educational potential. By spending more time with users individually, understanding their reading habits better and ascertaining what they wanted to gain from their library visits, these staff members (most prominently, Clarrie and Mark) hoped they could offer more and better resources to make the branch a better learning environment. Again, this chimes with a much wider set of debates, many of which will be explored in Chapter 8, about the paradox of front-line, street-level staff with professional statuses having to comply with the priorities of their superiors, particularly where professional instincts and official power structures collide (Lipsky, 1980).

The prevailing climate within the library service is one where assessment by numbers alone has become the cultural norm, as has criticism of such an approach (both within and beyond the library sector):

...local library authorities have been reluctant to adopt depth – qualitative methods that address highly textured issues like the social and economic impact of public libraries – mostly preferring instead to concentrate on market research techniques that test customer satisfaction at a relatively superficial level. (Black & Crann, 2002: 146)

Informal education can be at its best when least amenable to quantification for the purposes of assessment. (Hall, Williamson & Coffey, 2000: 469)

...evaluation is still restricted to counting the number of book issues, and there is little evidence of attempts to consider the impact of those ‘issues’ on individuals or groups in the community. In other words, the service still tends to measure what is measurable and consequently miss what is important. (Toyne & Usherwood, 2001: 149)

The market research techniques to which Black & Crann refer are firmly in evidence in the Welsh Public Library Standards (CyMAL, 2008b) which place a statutory duty on local authorities to conduct questionnaires of users to ascertain satisfaction with the service. These are then used to demonstrate, for example, the percentage of users under 16 who rate computer resources provided by the library service as ‘good’ or ‘OK’ (Standard F 3. WPLPI 12 – CyMAL, 2008b: 53). As Black & Crann point out, this provides only a cursory indication of a branch’s performance, and misses the type of social element(s) outlined above. It is not simply that these elements deserve to be given equal weight – if anything, they can be more important in providing a rounded cultural/education experience for those taking part. So the distinction between “what is measurable” and “what is important” (Toyne & Usherwood, 2001: 149) is not an arbitrary or unrepresentative one – the two things exist and can, at times, be mutually exclusive.

Indeed, it is for this very reason that one of the many tensions within Llancarreg revolved around the importance placed by management on audit techniques. Although battles between front-line staff and management are not a new or surprising phenomenon, the examples given above illustrate how this was not just an internecine clash over procedures, but a more deep-seated dispute over ‘what is important’. It also related to the ability of staff to alter that framework and promote other elements of the library as being equally valid. In this respect,

the tension was not just over the audit procedure itself, but over the effect it had on how the branch was run.

To take one small example, Llancarreg library holds over three hundred copies of Mills & Boon romance novels, compared to just a few dozen copies of classical fiction (along the lines of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens or the Brontë sisters). The cultural merits of this decision are discussed elsewhere in this thesis, but the principle reason for stocking books in these sorts of quantities comes down primarily to the statistical imperatives outlined above. In simple terms: Mills & Boon shifts copies to lenders in numbers that Dickens does not, and it therefore benefits the branch, the staff and the local authority to provide literature along such lines.

This policy, of course, becomes self-fulfilling after a time – the ready availability of light paperback fiction means that it gets increasingly more widely borrowed, boosting issue statistics further. Denser material, in contrast, is harder to find, gradually gets borrowed less, and is not replaced when it falls out of circulation. The cultural debate over this topic will be looked at in Chapter 8 – here, my point is simply that an institution which is meant to be broadly educational and cultural has, through its audit practices, adopted procedures which systematically privilege the most popular material because this increases the chances of meeting national standards on issue statistics and library use.

The role of statistics in the service, therefore, was not just a benign one for measuring book issues. It informed and shaped key decisions about how branches were run on a collective basis, and in doing so shaped the role of the service as a whole. This was not necessarily done in a way which can be seen as desirable, as critics have made clear:

The continuing emphasis on raising the levels of book issues leads to a culture where libraries become identikits of each other, with shelves full of populist material, with little room for diversity, and more importantly the non-fiction and reference areas being squeezed to accommodate more paperback novels... Public libraries need to represent the totality of human experience as much as is practicable; it seems to me that you do not do this by focussing on the most populist material at the expense

of breadth. This is a policy driven by issue statistics. (McMenemy, 2007: 275)

As I have said, it is not my intention here to pore over the cultural value of popular reading material – but from a purely objective standpoint, McMenemy's assertion that such books do not by themselves 'represent the totality of human experience' is not an unfair one. More importantly, he is right to suggest that the audit techniques of the modern library service are central in making such books vitally important to a given branch's survival – not because of their quality or lack of it, not because of who borrows them or why, but simply because they get borrowed at all. Whatever the cultural debates may be about the genres of book stock, the 'dreaded figures' system demonstrates one clear way in which an apparently benign system of measurement impacts on users in ways which are culturally significant.

At Llancarreg, this was tacitly acknowledged by staff, some of whom would have liked the freedom to have stocked a broader range of reading material. Having said that, the practicalities of a small branch and a settled user base meant that the library necessarily had to prioritise popular material simply because there was not always room for much else. As later chapters will reflect, however, the desire to attract new users to the branch was at times hampered by the limitations placed upon front-line staff. This, in turn, was a sign of a wider conflict between management, staff and indeed users, over the bureaucracy of the library and the lack of autonomy for front-line staff to take ownership of 'their' branch. It is this issue which will now be considered.

5.3: Autonomy, trust, and the workplace culture of the library

Previous sections of this chapter have already given an indication of the bureaucratic nature of the branch library at Llancarreg. Applying classical labels to modern surroundings is fraught with complications, but there are elements of Weberian bureaucracy which translated to the branch. For one thing, there was the impersonality of the library staffing structure, where (some) staff members often had little attachment to a given branch – although this was by no means true of all staff members, as the previous section demonstrated. Each library was subject to

the same set of expectations and audit procedures, irrespective of local circumstance, which again conformed to traditional conceptualisations of bureaucracy. The previous sections have also outlined the overspecialisation of administrators who became so firmly enmeshed with the system that they were often unaware of the consequences of the practices they perpetuated – whether that meant not realising the effects of audit culture on book stock, or the potential to alienate IT users by demanding personal information before allowing them to use computers.

The effect of that bureaucracy on staff autonomy was particularly marked. The notion that “bureaucracies have an adverse effect on the performance of library activities and also kill the urge to make constructive innovations” (Olorunsola, 2000: 43) says something important about the way that bureaucratic systems impact on staff’s ability and desire to develop their own branch. While this is not unique to the library profession, it is a problem which has been particularly well-reflected within library circles (see Black, 2000; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; Lynch, 1979; Nauratil, 1989; Usherwood, 1980, 2007).

The lack of autonomy for branch staff added another layer to the troubled relationship between front-line staff and their superiors within the local authority’s library service. In Llancarreg’s case, Clarrie was nominally in charge of running the branch (as well as its sister branch in a nearby suburb). However, the everyday reality often underlined how limited her remit was when it came to initiating real changes within and beyond Llancarreg’s walls. This was played out in several ways during the course of the research, and the clash came down to two contrasting views of what was best for library users – a service responsive to local needs or one which was standardised across the local authority area.

In this sense, the public library was a site for conflict between modern public sector management practices and a more traditional service with localised expectations. In another study of public libraries, it was suggested that “community was defined [by staff] as the antithesis of bureaucracy” (Newman, 2007: 897), and that same distinction was reflected at Llancarreg – over the course of the fieldwork period, it became increasingly apparent that the individual

and local flourishes which made Llanccarreg library Llanccarreg's library were considered to be under threat, often because of the local authority's policies. The following fieldnote gives one small example of this:

Harry, one of the semi-regulars in the branch, is also the leader of a local artists' club. For the last six years, the club have been allowed to display their works in Llanccarreg in what is seemingly a mutually-beneficial arrangement. The library gets some much-needed colour added to its drab, beige walls at no cost to the branch; they also get to display something by the local community. For the artists, they get the reward of having their work displayed in a public place, and occasionally one of them might make a sale – all the works have details of the artist displayed next to them, along with details of its price. In reality, few paintings get sold, but Harry assures me that one or two a year get bought and that this is a source of great pride to the individual artists and to the club.

The paintings themselves are of widely varying quality and styles, but undeniably brighten up the branch. Many of them are landscapes of Llanccarreg, and several others are portraits of artists' family members or pets. The club has had the current display up for around two months; it gets rotated every two to three months, when Harry comes in with a stack of new paintings and a stepladder to change the pictures on show.

Today, however, Harry has been asked to come into the library by Clarrie who, in turn, has been instructed by her boss (Laura) to ask Harry to remove the paintings. After a recent visit to the branch, Laura decided that the paintings should be removed because they "made the branch look a bit tatty; a bit amateur". From an objective standpoint, the paintings are indeed amateur – they have been painted by amateurs, after all – but they are certainly no more tatty than some of the fraying posters which line the other walls, or indeed many of the books on the shelves.

Harry takes the news surprisingly stoically, saying that he will try to find a new home for the artists' work in a local pub or perhaps in one of the church halls. And he is incredibly polite to Clarrie, saying how he understands that it wasn't her decision, and he's sure she did everything she could.

In return, Clarrie explains that "it might well just be temporary; they [management] are just reviewing procedures at the moment and asked for them to be taken down. I'll contact you if you can put them back up". This is a white lie on her part – Laura indicated categorically that the pictures were to be removed for good – and masks Clarrie's unease at having to undo a good community initiative.

After Harry has been around the branch, solemnly taking down the pictures and carefully stacking them in a large wooden crate, Clarrie sits at the issue desk looking visibly upset. She goes into the backstage area for ten minutes until another user comes in, by which time she seems to have recovered. Later in the week, however, in conversation with Molly, she says she is “distraught” at having to get the pictures taken down, adding: “it didn’t do anyone any harm to have them here, and people seemed to like them; there’s just no sense in what [Laura’s] made us do – it’s undone so much good work”.

This incident was one of the most poignant during the data collection, indicating as it did a disintegration of one of the library’s community roles and its effect on users and staff at a human level.

Significantly, it was not an isolated example. Just as Laura insisted on the removal of paintings which made the library look ‘tatty’, she also discontinued the service’s policy of selling off old stock. This was (and still is, in many authorities) a popular practice whereby a trolley of old books would be put in the lobby of the branch, and users could buy books for twenty or fifty pence, depending on their condition. When the policy changed at Llancarreg (and other libraries in the area), several users expressed surprise when they heard the news. Some said how buying old library books had got them into reading at an early age, and expressed sadness that the tradition was being lost.

Llancarreg’s local authority had also made a decision to prevent staff from accepting donations of second-hand books to add to the library’s stock. Again, this was a decision which some users thought was disappointing and unnecessary. For staff, the blanket nature of the policy undermined their professional ability to make decisions about ‘their’ branch – Molly remarked that “we [staff] are capable of deciding whether a donated book is suitable [to be accepted as a donation] or not”.

The motivation for instituting these practices may well have been a rational one on the part of the library’s management – taking such steps standardised the appearance of branches and eliminated elements which were thought to undermine that appearance. As Laura said when putting an end to the surplus book sales: “People expect libraries these days to be tidy, clean... If

people come in and see tatty old books, we'll look like we've not moved with the times at all". Yet for the front-line staff who worked in the branch every day and had to interact with the community affected by such changes, there was a fear that these moves produced uniformity at the expense of a more responsive, community-led service. In particular, the lack of input by those who were nominally in charge of the branch seemed to be a bone of contention:

"I really want to change things in this branch. I'd happily stay on after hours to give it a lick of paint or get it looking better, but even though I'm meant to be in charge I can't do anything like that without permission... They [management] take [the paintings] down like it's the easiest thing in the world, but they don't see the effect it has on the community, whereas I do see it because, well, I'm here." (Clarrie, senior librarian)

The lack of autonomy amongst front-line branch staff sits uneasily with the policy aim to have community-focused, responsive libraries (CyMAL, 2008a; DCMS, 1999; 2003, 2008a) and also with the library service's historical commitment towards community librarians leading the service at a local level rather than simply responding to nationally-set standards (Black & Muddiman, 1997). For Clarrie and her colleagues, the concern was that they had become functionaries and administrators rather than community resources to lead and assist with educational and cultural development, and to be facilitators of 'libraryness' in its various forms.

Of course, such complaints need to be seen in context. Front-line public sector staff grumbling about management is hardly a new phenomenon. As in this instance, this is often attributable to the divergence of objectives between front-line staff and their superiors:

Managers are interested in achieving results consistent with agency objectives. Street-level bureaucrats are interested in processing work consistent with their own preferences and only those agency policies so salient as to be backed up by significant sanctions. (Lipsky, 1980: 18/19)

When the objectives of management and street-level workers deviate, disagreement and discord (whether vocalised or not) is hardly surprising. Indeed, there is an argument that complaints about one's superiors are an integral part of

workplace culture, to the point of almost being a necessity if one is to belong in a given work environment: “You must know the [work] culture well and be part of it to be able to complain and get away with it” (Weeks, 2003: 10).

This was apparent when staff would occasionally reminisce about the bygone era of the public library when front-line staff had a greater say in how a branch was run. As the longest-serving staff member, Molly in particular was prone to such reminiscences. She had a firm nostalgia for the days when a librarian operated their branch as they wished, largely without interference – stocking material which they personally decided was appropriate for the local community, having a greater influence over opening times and arranging the library according to their personal taste. This served to further juxtapose the more centralised experience of newer employees like Mark or Clarrie, and remind them of a time when their equivalents in the service had a greater control of a branch.

I should also mention that this ‘contrastive rhetoric’ (Hargreaves, 1981) was occasionally also inverted, with staff reminding themselves and each other how far the service had come since the ‘bad old days’. Even here, however, the criticism tended to be of individual librarians who ran a branch badly rather than of the general situation of professionals having more freedom to run their branch as they saw fit.

In contrast, therefore, Clarrie’s own fiefdom of Llancarreg worked within much more restricted confines. She was able to exercise some discretion about new stock, and was extremely adept at getting to know the regulars and occasional users in the branch so that, socially at least, her sphere of influence over the branch and its community was well-established. Despite this, there was a great deal which she was unable to do within the branch – she was sometimes prevented from taking the storytime sessions or the IT classes, and she was not allowed to re-arrange or decorate the library to fit in with what she thought was appropriate; she even (reluctantly) had to get Harry to take down the paintings which offered one element of individuality to the branch. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that tales of the ‘golden age’ of librarians having almost total autonomy over their branch were described at times in almost reverential tones.

For all the contact Clarrie had with regulars (which meant she was held in reasonably high regard by many users, particularly the core group of Reg's gang), her ability to influence the strategic running of the branch in any significant way was diminished by the centralisation and rigid officialdom of the local authority. The homogeneity of the branch's stock, the uniform lay-out of many of the branch's facilities and the drab, standardised décor without any indication of local individuality contributed to making Llancarreg just like any other branch – which was exactly what management, and perhaps some users, wanted, but which at the same time undermined Clarrie's ability to adapt the branch to better reflect and attract the local community.⁵⁵

The examples of bureaucratic organisation outlined above are fundamental not just at Llancarreg, but to the library service at large. The place of staff as professional, qualified librarians was – they suggested – being undermined by a rigid and inflexible bureaucracy which threatened their autonomy. In other words, there was an:

...inevitable tension between bureaucratic authority, which is based upon official position and requires subordination to its directives, and professional authority, which is rooted in professional expertise and requires autonomy (Olorunsola, 2000: 45)

Such a tension is by no means unique to the library service, and its effects on the staff member and the service they provide can be stark:

The subordinate who perceives that he or she is not trusted feels little commitment to the effective performance of work. This particularly affects the way the remaining discretionary parts of the work are carried out. The superior's response is to try to tighten control and further reduce the discretionary elements. (Hill, 2005: 212)

Such a bleak picture of the public service arena gives little hope for the street-level administrator trying to make a difference in their field. The element of trust mentioned in the quote is particularly apt; the library service is based upon trust

⁵⁵ Again, whilst acknowledging the complexity of the term 'community', my intention is to unpack its meaning in greater detail in the following chapter rather than to do so here. My use of the term in this instance is purely descriptive.

(that a user can borrow a book for free and return it on-time), and yet that same commodity was seemingly in short supply when it came to front-line staff. As Power has it, “[t]rust releases us from the need for checking” (1997: 1). Just as a thriving audit culture suggests a lack of trust that a service will perform unless progress can be checked against targets, a thriving bureaucracy suggests a lack of trust that individual administrators can run their arm of the service without being heavily directed by their superiors.⁵⁶

In this sense, Llancarreg serves as a useful microcosm of the library service and of public services at large. The trained and qualified library staff, some of whom had professional qualifications and professional experience, felt that they were stuck within a rigid, uncompromising system which allowed little room for individual innovation or individual initiative. Moreover, the policy commitments towards community responsiveness were belied by “the slowness, the ponderousness, the routine, the complication of procedures and the maladapted responses of the bureaucratic organisation to the needs which they should satisfy” (Crozier, 1964: 3). Those bureaucratic structures may have often been implemented with and supported by sound reasoning, but it serves to highlight the discrepancy of a service aiming to simultaneously provide “a community-led service” (DCMS, 2008b) and also prescriptive Library Standards to create conformity (eg, CyMAL, 2008b). The ambition to “develop national services available in every library but which are adaptable to local needs and circumstances” (DCMS, 2003: 10) is a difficult policy objective to achieve if those local services are subject to identical (or at least extremely similar) national/regional requirements.

This impact of the national on the local is a theme which also runs through some of the following chapters. Here, I hope I have established some of the effects of policy on front-line services, not least in relation to the accountability and autonomy of front-line staff. The public library service has been criticised for not fostering a spirit of leadership at a grass-roots level (see Mullins & Linehan,

⁵⁶ Or, indeed, that those superiors cannot be allowed to run services at a local authority level without having Library Standards to guide them, and so on up the chain of command.

2005); those staff members exemplifying an “unwillingness to abide by the structure at hand” (Berry, 1998: 6) are viewed as being a potential threat to the bureaucratic structure. Of course, this cuts both ways, with subordinate staff seeing ‘management’ as a distant, unapproachable body to be treated with suspicion (leading to what Sennett describes as “the sheer disconnect between the centre and the periphery” – Sennett, 2006: 60). It was largely because of this that the uncomfortable and problematic compromises over library policy at Llancarreg had to be carefully negotiated.

5.4: ‘Tricking the stats’ – the bypassing of official procedures

The public library (at Llancarreg at least) was subject to a wide range of audit techniques and bureaucratic structures which were often prescriptive or which diminished front line staff’s ability to make key strategic decisions about their local branch. However, it would be remiss of me not to mention some of the ways in which these practices and structures were occasionally bypassed, either explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, by the same front-line staff.

I should emphasise at the start that such instances were rare; which is to say that my observations and knowledge of such instances was rare – the bypassing of official structures, when done surreptitiously, is by definition difficult to observe. Even with this caveat in mind, there were comparatively few instances which suggested that audit procedures and bureaucratic structures were circumvented. They are, however, significant in that they denote the institutional ways in which front-line staff pursue or protect their own priorities ahead of those of the wider service (Lipsky, 1980). I want to draw on two elements which illustrate this – these elements are by no means an exhaustive list, but both are worthy of analysis for different reasons.

One example relates specifically to audit practices, and the way in which staff could boost the branch’s performance indicators statistics. One staff member⁵⁷ admitted to me privately that they had, on occasions, exaggerated the

⁵⁷ I have chosen here to keep the staff member’s identity confidential because they asked

number of attendees at a storytime session to make the event sound more popular than it actually was. The same staff member also suggested that it would be theoretically possible to ‘trick the statistics’ by noting extra post codes on the list of users who had used the computers (in essence, exaggerating the number of users and, potentially, showing that the branch had attracted users from target areas). Whilst the staff member did not say that they personally had done this, they implied that it happened in other branches.

The fact that such falsifications or exaggerations happened, even if they happened rarely, underlines both the paucity of the audit measures and the lack of respect for them amongst front-line staff. As Lipsky notes, “the records kept by street-level bureaucrats are almost never complete or adequate to the task of *post hoc* auditing” (1980: 163) and, as such, the subversion of those records could become something which is done systematically. Moreover, the fact that some staff chose to subvert them (however rarely) demonstrated that staff were often opponents of the audit system rather than stakeholders in it.

These subversions of the system were often not as explicit or deliberate as those outlined above. Instances of statistics being falsified or other procedures being circumvented were by no means an obvious everyday occurrence. Staff did, however, have more subtle (and often probably unintended) ways of interpreting the structures in ways which suited them. The most routine example (and the one which constitutes the second element of this section) related to the ways in which staff privileged some of the branch’s users over others.

These sorts of instances happened in quite prosaic ways, and at first seemed unremarkable. It might have involved something as simple as a staff member overlooking a fine for a particular regular, or allowing one attendee at a storytime session to use the staff-only toilet. Over time, however, it became clearer to me that these benefits were only afforded to some users and not to all. Most individuals, on returning a library item late, would be asked to pay a fine (which varied between 10p and 50p per day depending on the type of item),

me to do so when they discussed the matter with me. I am content that keeping that confidence does not alter the point being made here.

whereas regulars might be lucky enough to have it overlooked, particularly if they said they had no change on them at the time. By the same token, staff would generally tell users that there were no publicly-available toilet facilities in the branch – but would occasionally make exceptions and allow users access to the staff toilet in the backstage area of the branch. Another example involved one regular (a man called Gary, who got on very well with Mark, the junior librarian) who would often come into the branch just before closing time and ask if he could take home the local paper – a request which was always acceded to when Gary asked, but not for anyone else.

More generally, certain groups of regulars – in particular Reg and his gang – can be fairly described as a ‘having the ear’ of Clarrie (as the branch manager) about particular issues. When Madge (one of the gang members) asked for the library’s front steps to be swept of leaves during the autumn, Clarrie ensured that this was done the next day; when Reg asked to leave a petition about a local issue in the library, this was allowed. It is hard to be sure whether these requests would have been handled differently had they come from non-regulars, but the eagerness of staff (particularly Clarrie) to keep the regulars ‘on-side’ was notable.

What is interesting is that, again, this disparity denotes an inconsistency. It can be seen on the one hand as the privileging of some users over others; it can also be cited – in policy terms – as involving and nurturing key stakeholders. The extra efforts by staff on behalf of some users can thus be perceived in much more positive light. Furthermore, the “ubiquity of bias” (Lipsky, 1980: 111) is merely evidence of staff using what little discretion and autonomy they do have in ways which they deem appropriate. It could even be argued that these instances show compassionate, human interactions between staff and (some) users which precisely underpin the library service’s ambitions to be more responsive and sensitive to its users (DCMS, 2003; 2008a). Yet crucially, the aim for libraries to “redouble their efforts to reach non-users” (DCMS, 2003: 9) is undermined if it is the needs of regulars which are privileged whilst non-regulars are treated differently.

5.5: Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the audit culture of a branch library and explained the nature of bureaucracy at the front-line of the library service. By drawing on ethnographic observations and conversations, I have shown how a branch library is run and some of the shortcomings of the systems in place. In particular, the unintended consequences of audit techniques on services, and the lack of autonomy for those charged with front-line service delivery are two points of interest which have been singled out for specific comment. The wider issue of audit and bureaucracy in public services has also been raised, and the data shown in this chapter hopefully provides an illustration of how this can be manifested.

In straightforward policy terms, there is a clear discrepancy between stated policy ambition and front-line reality in this regard. National policy guidance has emphasised the importance of “local flexibility” and being “sufficiently flexible to adapt to local needs” (DCMS, 2003: 7) but for the average library branch, the centralisation of power has a direct impact on front-line staff’s ability to make decisions at a local level. This situation is admittedly partly a historic one: “This highly bureaucratic system, by which the library is looked upon, first and foremost, as just one department of the local authority, can serve to stultify initiative” (Corbett, 1982: 112).

As Chapter 2 noted, this situation is not helped either by the fact that libraries often get organised at local authority level alongside bigger, more demanding services like schools or alongside more glamorous services like leisure centres – in each case, the library service receives only a fraction of the attention from policy-makers. At ground level, meanwhile, the result is that budgetary and resource pressures, as well as the ‘highly bureaucratic system’, can prevent staff from taking bold and innovative decisions about how to run a given branch.

In audit terms, the position is not dissimilar – the motivations for organising the system are often understandable. The need to meet Library Standards and to record information correctly so that bids for funding can be made is necessary if the service is to be improved. Yet the resultant impact is that a nominally cultural and educational service focuses disproportionately on light,

popular fiction in order to generate the right figures for audit, and this process becomes cyclical. The system is therefore criticised on the one hand for not being 'serious' enough about the library's role by focusing on populist material at the expense of education and learning, whilst on the other hand not taking into account the 'fun', value-added element of library life which front-line staff feel is the most important element of their job.

Overall, the situation at Llancarreg library was in many ways reflective of wider debates around audit practices and bureaucracy in public services (a theme which will be picked up in Chapter 8). There was dissatisfaction amongst staff about the perceived levels of interference from management over their professional domain; there was also a concern over the prevailing audit culture which many felt served as a distraction from the more important daily tasks of the job. Yet the bureaucratic structures and practices endured because they were felt to be both necessary and useful by management who, in turn, had responsibilities to their superiors, which may have been equally as contested.

Having focused on the official functions of a public branch library and the ways in which these are measured, the next chapter will explore the unofficial and informal ways in which that same space is used and consider what these say about a library's 'libraryness'.

6. “Together but separate”: community and engagement in a library

“Together, but separate. All sorts of people come here and do whatever they want, and find a way to do it without getting on each other’s nerves, mostly! Those who want to mix do, those who don’t, won’t. Like I say, together but separate.” (Molly, librarian)

This is the second of three chapters exploring the everyday social life of the branch library at Llancarreg. This chapter focuses on how issues of community and civic engagement are interpreted within the social and public arena of a branch library.

The unswerving emphasis on ‘community’ has been conspicuous within contemporary debates over nearly all aspects of public policy, from education (eg, Coare & Johnston, 2003; Tett, 2006) to health (eg, Cropper *et al*, 2007; Department of Health, 2006) and law & order (Hughes, 2007; Rogers, 2005). The term itself, however, remains layered with complications and contradictions: “Never was the word ‘community’ used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life” (Hobsbawm, 1994: 428). This has led to a situation where the very word is heavily used within policy circles, but rarely meaningfully explored or unpacked. In this chapter, I intend to build on academic interpretations of the term (eg, Cohen, 1985; Day, 2006; Delanty, 2003) by exploring its application and implications in a contemporary public social setting.

The idea of a holistic ‘community’ (or several communities) with similar or complementary ideals for the use of public space is a problematic one. By its very nature, the term accepts that communities will sometimes exist in opposition to others, and that their defining features are often based on such a distinction:

A reasonable interpretation of the word’s use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. ‘Community’ thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. (Cohen, 1985: 12)

These inherent differences are often problematic in policy terms. ‘Proper’ use of a

given public space for one community cannot be interpreted as applicable to all communities using that same space.

Nevertheless, people's use of the public realm for reasons of interaction is still laden with social significance, and it is for this reason that the promotion of such principles plays an important role in developing public policy. By way of an example, the previous chapter drew attention to the 'unmeasurables' of library life which were not picked up by the audit culture which measured the branch's performance. Those 'unmeasurables' often centred on the social encounters and connections made in the branch at Llancarreg, which undoubtedly played an important part in sustaining the local library-going community.

Importantly, this sociability often developed into manifestations of what can reasonably be described as civic engagement and participation. The 'library community' (however defined) was more than just a social network – it also provided a platform from which to engage in important local issues. Chapter 4 also mentioned the way that the branch's regulars had rallied around in the mid-1990s to save the library from closure, in a show of both civic and political engagement.

Conceptualisations of 'citizenship' are, of course, equally contested (see, for example, Hall & Williamson, 1999; Rogers & Muir, 2007). Yet the importance of a community to foster the shared ideals and shared identity for civic engagement is paramount. The mutual dependence of community and civic identity will be explored in this chapter through fieldnotes showing everyday social interactions as key constitutive elements of civic contact.

The chapter is organised into three sections. The first outlines some of the social networks of the branch library, specifically those networks based around formal activities in the branch. By doing so, my intention is to convey an understanding of how community and social interaction is 'managed' and promoted in formal ways by a public institution such as a branch library. The second section will turn attention to those groups which operated in more informal ways, using the library as a meeting place and focal point for social

exchange either through arranged gatherings or chance meetings. This section therefore provides examples of how community is expressed in more casual ways by users of the same service. The third section chapter will then go on to discuss how the branch also hosted sets of users whose use of the library was much less concerned with social interaction, but was still contributing to (and drawing on) some of the social rules of the branch. Running through these descriptions is a commentary on what the various forms of interaction say about communities in places like Llancarreg and the role of social institutions in fostering them; the discussion also reflects on how this community spirit translates into notions of participation and engagement.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the themes of community and civic engagement within the library specifically. These themes are then extended and developed in Chapter 8 to reflect wider social debates.

6.1: Activities and interaction

The following short fieldnote illustrates some of the ways in which a branch library serves its community and what, in practical terms, that label means:

This morning's IT class is in full swing. Today's is slightly busier than usual – all four computers are occupied rather than the two or three which is the norm (often because at least one member of each class will be ill or unavailable each week). This is the first lesson for this particular group, consisting of one man (Ernest, a retired regular who is part of Reg's gang) and three woman, whose names I don't know but who are semi-regulars in the branch (coming maybe once a month; enough for me to recognise the faces and for them to know some of the staff, but not so much that I am aware of them being members of any of the branch's social networks).

Clarrie slowly calls the class to order and gets them to introduce themselves; the women revealing their names – Gloria, Jacqui and Margaret. This, in turn, allows them to make social connections ("oh, you're Vic's sister, aren't you?", "I remember you now; you used to live on Church Street, didn't you?"). This underlines the inter-connectedness of the older section of Llancarreg's community. Not all of the residents in the area know each other, by any means, but many of the older residents have lived in the area for long enough that there are often only a few degrees of separation between them and their

cohorts. This is a contrast with the younger, newer residents of Llancarreg, many of whom have moved to the area because of its attraction as a principally suburban neighbourhood; for these residents, their social sphere in the area is generally much smaller.

With the introductions and conversations over, Clarrie gets the class underway – this week, they'll be learning how to use the computer mouse and how to use menus and taskbars on Windows. After going through some of the concepts with them, she then sets the group their first exercise of the morning, for which they will be left alone for five minutes while she makes herself a well-earned cup of tea. The exercise involves them playing a Flash game on the computer called "Piggles", where they use their mouses (or 'mice' – the class have a short jokey discussion on which is the correct plural for the tool) to move a series of cartoon pigs around an animated farmyard.

Shortly after Clarrie has left them and disappeared into the staff room, the group gradually abandon the game in favour of a conversation. It starts off with remarks about the task they've been set ("Oh, I can't do this – my hand keeps slipping!", "Silly, isn't it? I feels like I'm back in school!"), but swiftly moves on to other topics ("They reckon it's going to snow at the weekend", "I'll be off on my holiday by then, thank goodness") until what was an IT class has become a vibrant, pleasant conversation between a new group of chums.

This is often the case during the IT class; groups will frequently use the breaks for exchanging gossip, and even subvert the class altogether so that the learning of IT becomes a secondary element of what is essentially a social get-together. Today, it is particularly striking because this is a group where there were no strong pre-existing ties. The group have been brought together in the physical space of the library for an ostensibly learning-based activity (which they are pursuing, albeit not particularly vigorously), but they have also forged social ties as part of that experience.

This has not happened by accident. The inclusion of tasks and group work within each session is something on which Clarrie is quite keen; she has previously said to her colleagues that in her opinion it allows groups an opportunity to exchange both social and learning information. Although the tasks are part of the structured IT class programme, Clarrie includes as many of them as possible and as frequently as possible because of the benefit she sees it bring to users in the form of social exchanges like that which is taking place this morning.

The type of social interaction outlined above is only one of the means by which Llancarreg's users found themselves using the public space of the library as an arena for conversations, exchanges and social contact. The previous chapter

looked in great detail at those elements of library provision which were seen to be important and valuable as part of the service's audit practices – this fieldnote illustrates the routine, everyday means by which the library provided a public service but which was not subject to the same analysis. It was often these 'unmeasurable' criteria which made staff and users fond of the library, and which accounted for its appeal.

In the example outlined above, it was the dual role of the IT class which formed part of the branch's attraction – it offered a setting for learning, but also a social and informal element which made it enjoyable for participants:

"To me, the breaks between the learning are as important as the learning itself. When [Clarrie] leaves us on our own for a bit, we can ask each other the daft questions on the things we're not sure of and we gets to have a chat." (Ernest, IT class participant)

This was reinforced by the type of activity which was chosen for users – the choice of the 'Piggles' game to teach users how to use a mouse may have been outwardly described by participants as 'silly', but it was a very deliberate choice on Clarrie's part. The effect it had was to put them in a mindset where social interaction would be legitimised. The game brought the class to an equal level, and almost encouraged them to joke about the silliness of what they were being asked to do. Thus, the teaching techniques helped users to feel more able to communicate on a social level with their peers. This, in turn, established a sociable feel to the class, whereby participants could chat, joke and engage with each other.

Similar patterns were reflected in the other organised activities in the branch which formed the library's 'occasions' (DCMS, 1999: 9). The weekly storytime sessions were a case in point, as Chapter 4 has alluded to. Some mothers⁵⁸ would bring babies to the sessions, even though they were possibly too

⁵⁸ I have deliberately referred to 'mothers' rather than 'parents' because, almost without exception, it was mothers rather than fathers who brought children to the storytime sessions. Children did sometimes come to the library with their fathers (particularly moreso at weekends), but the organised storytime sessions were in practice solely the domain of the mothers.

young to gain a significant educational benefit from the sessions, whilst some of the children themselves would occasionally get bored with the stories and walk off around the library, leaving their siblings and mothers to listen alone. These factors went some way towards signifying the real social purpose of the sessions. Without wanting to denigrate the educational benefits of the sessions for the children, the main beneficiaries of storytime in many ways were the mothers who attended – it was they who made the decision to come to the library, and at least one of the motivations for this was the conversation, socialising and networking which followed each storytime. These chats would often last for half an hour or longer (at least as long, in other words, as the stories themselves), with the mothers sitting in the same area of the library to talk. Of course the sessions also brought a benefit to the children, but the fact they were enjoyable and beneficial to the mothers as well is what ensured their ongoing success – mothers who might otherwise have stayed at home and read to their child came to the library to catch up with friends.

This type of communication was as crucial to the mothers in helping to bond them together into a social network as the IT classes were in helping some of the older residents to forge or renew social ties. As one regular at the storytime session put it:

“In the short time I’ve lived [in Llanccarreg], I’ve got to know so many people through coming [to the storytime sessions]. It’s hard when you come to a new place, but this has been a really good way to make friends with similar people. It’s easy because it’s all laid on for you; you don’t have to do anything except turn up at the right time!” (Janet, occasional user and mother of four)

As Janet’s remark suggests, storytime’s organised nature was particularly crucial. The mothers who attended were part of the newer, younger generation of Llanccarreg residents who had fewer ties to the local area and smaller social circles in the locality. As such, the regularity and structured nature of the sessions made it easier for them to get together and meet in a way which might not have happened outside the walls of the library. Again, the importance of the physical space of the library deserves to be noted – for mothers of children below school age, the library storytime session replaced the school gate as the focal point. It

provided the mothers with a place in which they could seek to exchange gossip and to give and receive social support.

Incidentally, the word ‘gossip’ has been used several times already in this chapter, and deserves to be unpacked a little more critically. My use of the term – like that of the people of Llancarreg who engaged in it – is in no sense pejorative or dismissive. What people were doing could equally be described as ‘conversations’, or ‘dialogue’ – terms which have far more noble connotations and are associated with ideas around civic engagement. Yet within the context of everyday life, the difference is wholly subjective. The people of Llancarreg, in the daily conversations I observed, were conversing, talking, chatting and shooting the breeze – defining where gossip stopped and dialogue began would be arbitrary. My description of the activities as chatting or gossiping denotes purely that people were talking on matters which mattered to them at that particular time in a particular way (see also Besnier, 2009; Goodman & Ben-Ze’ev, 1994; Tebbutt, 1995).

It was this gossip and gentle chat which meant that the organised activities within the branch provided benefits in terms of espousing a sense of a library community for the users of Llancarreg. Indeed, staff saw the storytime sessions as one of the cornerstones of the library’s provision, predominantly because of the twin social and educational advantages it brought to library users. Staff tacitly acknowledged this social importance, and this was one of the justifications for holding them even when attendances were small, or for altering the start times to maximise attendance (a point mentioned earlier in the Chapter 4). The formal, organised activities therefore played a crucial role in establishing a feeling of a library community – and they also helped to establish a framework for another layer of more informal social interactions which will now be examined.

6.2: Informal interaction and the issue desk

While the most conspicuous level of social engagements at Llancarreg were apparent when there were organised ‘occasions’ (DCMS, 1999: 9) in the branch, it would be wrong to imply that it was just the participants of those activities who

gained from them. In actual fact, there were indirect social benefits to other users as well.

For example, the noise of the IT class would often interrupt the hush of the library and provide a gentle background hum of noise which, in turn, would sometimes make other users feel more at ease to start conversations with staff or each other. By the same token, the storytime sessions served as a prelude to the largest gathering of the retired regulars and Reg's gang for the week. The volume and hubbub created by the organised events helped to legitimise social interaction amongst other users, providing a sonic background against which their own conversations would be less conspicuous. Even for the regulars and their pre-existing social networks, a stimulus was valuable in providing an opportunity in which social contact could flourish.

Amongst the regulars, this was not quite as pronounced – they would meet and chat even when the branch was quiet – but it was no coincidence that the largest gatherings tended to meet at times when the library would be more boisterous. With the 'right to chat' already established, the groups could then get down to the serious business of conversation. Reg's gang, unsurprisingly given their central place within the library, were the most prominent exponent of group talk, and probably did as much for the branch's social inclusion as any official programme or policy. Many of the gang were elderly residents whose forays out of their homes were rare occurrences – at least two of the gang only went out two or three times a week (to shop, to visit the library and perhaps also to visit family). Coming to the library, therefore, assumed a critical importance in their social life; it is no exaggeration to say that in some cases the conversations with the other gang members or familiar staff could be the only time someone might be addressed by their own name all week, or be asked how they were.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ It is worth adding a note here about my own experiences of engaging with the elderly set of users in Reg's gang. It might have been reasonable to have expected the gang to be wary of the presence of a younger (25 year-old) male with a shaved head, hovering around 'their' library and asking them questions – and, indeed, I anticipated that it might take some time for the gang to regard me as part of the library furniture. This was undoubtedly true for a minority of the gang members, who initially seemed reticent to talk openly with me – but, pleasingly and fortunately, the majority of the gang members seemed to have no such reservations. Reg and I had bonded very quickly after

The same people might also have met their friends by chance in the Post Office queue or the supermarket, and this too was commonplace. As one critique of suburban life has observed:

In fact, many technically public places are actually used by the same people over and over again until all become acquaintances, or are commandeered by groups of friends for their own purposes.
(Baumgartner, 1988: 102)

In Llancarreg, the 'commandeering' of the social space of the library was noticeable. Reg's gang, for example, had through habit made the branch 'their' place on a Monday morning for social interaction. Indeed, the pre-ordained Monday morning meet in the library was more often than not their primary social outlet. Again, the physical space of the library as a community facility allowed this to happen. It was not the library's primary official function, and nor (as the previous chapter has highlighted) did it attract any praise or recognition from management, but it clearly marked a fulfilment of the library service's stated objectives around social inclusion (CyMAL, 2008a; DCMS, 1999, 2003).

The greatest amount of socialising took place amongst the groups of older users. As has been noted elsewhere (eg, Hawkins *et al*, 2001), age – far more than gender or social class – defines and shapes certain elements of library use. For the older residents, the branch provided a physical focus for their socialising, and fulfilled a wider purpose than just being a repository of books. In this sense, the data partially reflected the findings of Willmott & Young (1957) who found that, in a suburban environment, a lack of family ties was made up for by participation in other social groups (a finding echoed later by Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips & Ogg, 2001, in their study of older people, which pointed to older people sustaining social relations and support networks). At Llancarreg, the social groups created and used by the older residents were not always formal clubs or societies

discovering we both followed the fortunes of the local football team, whilst another gang member (Evie) and I shared an interest in Victoria fiction and the writings of the Brontë sisters. Having established these alliances relatively early on, I was gradually introduced to more and more of the gang and quickly became familiar with most of them. On hearing that my work in the library was part of a university project, many of the gang members would want to proudly relay to me the academic achievements of their own grandchildren, and were enthusiastic to help me by participating in my own research.

(although these did exist, in the library and beyond), but they were semi-formal associations which offered valued support for their members.

There was a definite link, therefore, between the organised events and the informal gatherings: the organised activities helped provide a timetable around which the casual gatherings could take place, both physically and in terms of generating levels of conversation. This, again, is noteworthy – the space of the library was important in providing a focus and a meeting point for groups, but was regulated in such ways that only one active or noisy group could fill the space at any one time without interfering. Thus, the storytime sessions, IT classes, book groups and informal gatherings of regulars were all timed so as not to overlap with each other. By doing this, the consensual silence which generally dominated the library space (see the next section) was never seriously threatened by several competing groups using the space at once, whilst the space itself was never crowded or congested in ways which might have distracted from the seclusion which was an attraction for many of the library's users.

Yet this is not to say that the social activity of Llancarreg was limited to the organised activities and the informal gatherings of regulars. There were countless everyday instances of staff and users exchanging pleasantries, swapping information, passing on jokes, recommending books to read or casually discussing stories in the newspaper. These one-to-one conversations occurred every single hour of the library day, and formed the backbone of the 'unmeasurables' referred to in the previous chapter.

In this sense, the issue desk where staff spent much of their day became more than just a site for formal and administrative exchange. In reality, it was the location of social, communal and civic interactions where users could bring a variety of issues and receive attention. This helpfulness and sociability was then replicated by other users throughout the branch, who picked up on the ambience of the library and were able to sustain it in their own ways.

Thus, on any one day it would not be uncommon to see Clarrie having a virtually identical conversation about the weather with five or six different users,

or for Reg to ask three members of his gang separately whether they had watched the game last night. A female regular who recognised another's face might stand by the Mills & Boon rack and suggest a new release that she might enjoy. An IT user who was struggling with something on the computer might ask the person at the next work station for help rather than troubling staff, which might lead to a conversation about a particular website. Molly might wander over to the children's area and offer a box of crayons and some paper to a child and its mother, and then make appreciative noises about whatever picture got drawn as a result. Any of these events would be an utterly normal and unremarkable part of the day in the library, and a casual observer might see little significance in them at all. Yet in each case, the offer of social contact was being made from one person in the library to another. These instances may have lacked the organised, structured framework of the storytime sessions or IT classes, but their social significance was no less important; indeed, for the more reticent members of Llancarreg's community, the one-to-one conversations in the library were in some cases a very rare opportunity for a conversation, and the trips to the library were important because they provided that opportunity. Once again, therefore, the library provided a location in which such social contact could occur, and even be actively encouraged through the structure and nature of the organised sessions and also through the social dynamics of the space.

The noise, the hubbub, the organised events and the casual chit-chat were central to the life of Llancarreg's community. It is the public element of the library's ethos which is of significance here. In my earlier discussion of citizenship (see Chapter 2), I mentioned the closely-intertwined nature of civic/political expression and the public arena. At Llancarreg, this was in evidence for the groups outlined in the sections above – Reg's gang might spend their time talking about the news story of the day, or formulating a view on a local matter of interest; Chapter 2 made reference to this group using the library as the place to house their petition against a local pub's application for later opening hours. The public space of the library became a public arena for engagement – it may not have been this arena all the time (far from it), but when the groups who used the library needed to form a community to discuss something, the library was one of the places to do it.

It is worth noting here that these examples of social organisation and civic engagement were not limited just to the male users of the library. There is a tendency amongst those who have written about the place of women in relation to conceptualisations of citizenship (eg, Lister, 1997; Walby, 1994) and of urban sociology (eg, Lofland, 1975) to suggest that women “may participate in organised groups, but such groups are tangential to the structuring of community life” (Lofland, 1975: 145) or that there is a distinction between (male) civic engagement and “the kind of informal politics in which women are more likely to engage” (Lister, 1997: 196). From the data generated at Llancarreg, no such distinctions were readily apparent; the women of the library were just as involved as the men in the formal and informal interactions which represented the branch’s equivalent of civic society.⁶⁰ This, of course, is still a finding in its own right, and the fact that gender emerged as a theme in this respect could point to a useful area for further study.

As I have already mentioned, the daily conversations could be regarded as idle gossip or as important dialogues of critical issues; distinguishing between the two is somewhat arbitrary because the fact that these exchanges happened at all allowed for the possibility of civic expression. Having outlined this theme, I now want to turn attention to a very different, but no less important, manifestation of community expression within the branch at Llancarreg.

6.3: ‘Companionable silence’ and individual use

I have identified three discrete groups within the branch at Llancarreg who all had

⁶⁰ On a reflective note, one of Lofland’s other criticisms is of the effect of male researchers conducting the bulk of urban sociology in relation to the representation of women in their work. My own response to this is twofold. Firstly I wish to reassert my interest in suburban sociology as a distinct area of interest, and one in which I would argue there is a more equal gender balance; far gone are the days when – as Lofland herself puts it – “the man who enters suburbia during the day can make the female group feel that here comes Trouble” (Lofland, 1975: 161). Secondly, and linked to this, was my own relationship with the women at Llancarreg; obviously Clarrie was one of my main, and most trusted, sources of information, as were some of the female members of Reg’s gang (not least Evie), and at no stage did I feel that my status as a male researcher affected their preparedness to converse with me.

differing levels of involvement within the library community. The first group (outlined in section 6.1) were the regulars who would meet and actively take part in discussions either in groups or on a one-to-one basis; this encapsulates Reg's gang, the IT class, storytime attendees and the regulars who would chat with staff. The second group, outlined in the previous section, were larger in number – these were the people who would come to the branch, either on their own or with a family member, to return books, select new ones and who would then leave; they spent less time in the branch, but would have a conversation or join in with one if the opportunity presented itself.

That leaves one final group, who came to the library, stayed for longer periods of time than the second group, but who did not engage so readily in conversation. This was still a sizeable proportion of the library's users, but their presence was less conspicuous. As the following fieldnote demonstrates, however, these users still shared certain qualities which bound them together as a coherent group with important shared values:

It is a bright early summer's day in Llancarreg and I have been sat at my familiar spot at the work table, reading a book. It is still fairly early in the morning, a little after 10am, but the good weather has brought a larger than usual crowd to the branch. Three of the computers are being used, one by a teenage girl listening to music, and the other two by some recent graduates of the IT class who are sending e-mails and occasionally exchanging a word or two with each other. Mark, the most junior of the library staff, is alone on duty, and he is quietly categorising books at the issue desk. One other user, a lady I don't recall seeing in the branch before, is browsing the non-fiction shelves.

The branch won't be properly busy for another hour, but this is a fair crowd for the time of day and the tapping of the keyboards, the bleeping on Mark's scanner and the turning of book pages mean there is a gentle level of background noise. The ambience in the branch is perfectly convivial, but there is also an atmosphere of people quietly getting on with whatever tasks they have before them, undisturbed and peacefully. This tableau is a reasonably familiar one in the branch, and in some ways is its natural setting in between the organised events and social interactions which punctuate the day; this kind of hushed but purposeful scene is played out very frequently, and perhaps closely resembles many people's stereotype of a 'traditional' library.

Presently, out of the blue, a bird flies through the open window at the street end of the branch. It flies around the roof area of the library for a few minutes, bashing against the windows above the IT area, and then returning back to the large window through which it enters, but can't find the open pane to escape. The flapping noise from its wings, and the tapping of it trying to get through the window is enough for me to raise my head out of my book and watch it, and Mark has also spotted it coming in. We both sit silently for a few minutes, watching it fly around the library, hoping it will find its escape easily. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the bird (a small sparrow, from the look of it) will have difficulty in getting out.

I walk over to the issue desk and ask Mark whether I should open all the windows as wide as possible to give it a chance to get out; he agrees, and says he'll ring through to the Maintenance Department to see if they can suggest anything else. I climb up to the high windows and open them, and then continue to watch the bird for a few more minutes while Mark talks on the phone.

All the while, the four other people in the library carry on what they are doing in complete silence. One of the people on the computer looks up at the bird above him for a few seconds, and then goes back to his screen, while the lady browsing non-fiction barely gives the bird a second glance, and just chooses her books, checks them out at the issue desk and leaves.

After a few more minutes, I ask Mark for a tea towel (which he retrieves from the back room), and after a few failed attempts I manage to catch the frightened bird in it and release it back out through the window. Even then, my fellow library users sit unmoved, concentrating on their work. Mark gives me a quick thumbs-up and a 'thanks' when I return his tea towel before going back to the pile of books on his desk without further comment.

Initially, I find this muted reaction a little baffling; the incident is arguably the most exciting and outstanding of the fieldwork so far, and yet nobody else in the branch has paid a great deal of attention. But this unshakeable tranquillity of the library is perhaps as much a part of its routine as the social interactions, loud conversations, raucous children and boisterous events which are more conspicuous and audible during the library day. Today's events show it at its most extreme, but the preference for calmness over disorder is a key part of the service's appeal.

I have included this fieldnote because I think it says something significant about this third set of library users and what they value in the library. An incident like a bird flying through the window gets largely ignored by those in the branch precisely because it is not part of the everyday routine in a way that some of the

noisier events are. People, by and large, expect (or at least are not surprised by) a rowdy child running around the library, or peals of laughter from the old male regulars as they share a dirty joke surreptitiously behind the newspaper. Loud chatter from the mothers after storytime or from the IT class participants feels entirely ordinary, and part of the public space of the library. These noises are an accepted part of the public library setting, even if they interfere with or distract from an individual's private study and solace.

An unusual occurrence like the bird flying in is very much unexpected and, in the context above, unwelcome. Far from generating a level of bemusement or animation amongst users, the opposite is true. The unusual incident is ignored, with people preferring instead to concentrate on, or return swiftly to, the everyday. The commonality of several users all occupying themselves quietly (even if other 'expected' noises are happening elsewhere) forms part of the library's familiarity and appeal, and those things which threaten that peaceful self-occupation are unwelcome. In that respect, there is as much communality and community in a library full of people working in silence as there can be in a library full of people talking. This section will seek to explain why this calmness and tranquillity supports (rather than threatens) the communal atmosphere of a branch.

For the majority of users, trips to the library are to obtain reading material for use at home (Black, 2000; Murison, 1988), so the time spent in the branch is often quite short. This was no less true in Llancarreg, where most library users would stay for little more than ten or fifteen minutes – time enough to return books, browse the shelves for a few new ones, and to check them out at the issue desk. Some may hang around to chat with staff or other users, but the majority are borrowing books for themselves and their families to read elsewhere, and spend little more time in the branch than they practically needed to.

This may not have a direct contribution towards expanding or strengthening the library community in the way that some of the events or gatherings in the previous section may have done, but it may well still contribute to the community of Llancarreg as a whole. Many users of libraries choose and

borrow material on behalf of family or close friends with books acting as a “bond to strengthen home and family, the most intimate units of society” (Murison, 1988: 79). Material borrowed from libraries can play a part in the strengthening of community/family relations within the domestic sphere.

While there was no strong evidence to suggest that this was particularly true at Llancarreg, it seems reasonable to assume that the branch did reflect this wider trend. Several of the male regulars would sit in the library and read the paper while their wives picked books for them, and parents would often come to the branch alone to borrow material for their children. Those books were being borrowed to read by people in their home, and in this sense the library still helped to reinforce domestic social ties.

In this sense, the library still fulfilled a role for the users who came to the library without engaging in the kind of social activities described in the previous two sections. Yet the users outlined in the fieldnote above were not outwardly showing interaction in this sense; for them, it was the library itself which provided something which bound them together – by offering a free, open space in which users could engage in quiet, individual activity, the library was offering an important service above and beyond the spoken interaction.

This is not unusual in libraries or within the public sphere as a whole. Many public settings exhibit elements of social harmony beyond spoken interaction with other users of a given space:

The pleasure may reside in the comfort of being surrounded by the hum of conversation... it may very well be the reason some people go to such highly sociable public settings as cafés and bars but remain aloof from the spoken interaction... Pleasure may also be derived from a sense of oneness with the other inhabitants of a setting. (Lofland, 1998: 89)

That dual sense of oneness and aloofness is particularly apparent in the public library service. Indeed, there is a long-standing and widely-held view that this is a core element of the service’s role:

Go to a library and you’re still in a social space whether or not anyone is talking. They used to call it companionable silence... being able to look

around you and feel a deep sense of commonality without having to articulate it out loud. (Hanley, 2008)

The 'public space' library... has always offered intimacy and seclusion for the self, a 'sanctity (or romance) of place' for the individual. (Black, 2000: 162)

Far from being an anti-social instinct, the 'companionable silence' is extremely social, exhibiting contented harmony without the need for spoken interaction. The use of public space may be manifested in ways which are atomised and individual, but there can still be a collective element behind it.

It was in this sense that the third group of Llanccarreg's users can be seen as a collective entity and not just a set of individuals. Whereas the users outlined in previous sections were united by their treatment of the space as a place for interaction, this group collectively treated the library space as a place for quiet seclusion and tranquillity. Their lack of involvement with the groups of regulars or lack of participation in organised events should not be interpreted as indicating a lack of sociability on their part, or as an indication that the library community (or the community at large in Llanccarreg) was frail.

For example, one user at Llanccarreg (Alun) would come into the branch most days on his lunch hour from the aluminium works near the branch and read his book for half an hour. On one level, that activity is unremarkable – people reading in a library is hardly unexpected. Yet this was not just a user borrowing a book and flicking through it before leaving; Alun would come to the branch nearly every day to read. He could have read in the staff room at work, or sat in the park, but he chose to come to the branch because of the serenity it offered.

By the same token, once a week on a Friday morning, a schoolgirl of about 14/15 from the nearby high school would come into the branch and spend a free period sitting quietly in the teen corner of the library reading or working. She would sometimes borrow or return books and, again, would respond politely to anything said to her by staff; but for the most part her visits were limited to solitary activities. Again, the regularity of her visits indicated that the library still held an attraction as a place in which to work peacefully; the walk to the library

and back being deemed worth it because of the companionable silence which it offered.

These instances (or ones similar to them) were repeated on a daily basis. Many users to whom I spoke said that they welcomed coming to the library as a quiet place to escape from the outside world for a short time and engage in a peaceful, private activity. This is consistent with other studies, where the tranquillity of a library is a key 'draw factor' for many users. It is interesting, for example, that one mass-observation respondent to Black & Crann's library study noted that a library is "a comfortable place to be with pleasant likeable people" (Black & Crann, 2002: 154) – the key element being 'to be with', but not necessarily to mix with! Thus, the library provides "a social experience, [but] also offers intimacy and seclusion for the self: a 'sanctity of place' for the individual" (*ibid.*: 154).

The desire for these quiet moments of solitude was a source of occasional conflict. One regular (a middle-aged male whose name I was never able to establish, but to whom staff referred as 'Mr Grumpy') would come in to read the paper and browse for books on Saturday mornings. He had a particular objection to noise in the library (especially when it emanated from children, as was frequently the case on a Saturday). and would sometimes take the step of asking people to be quiet or telling parents to keep their children quiet, often remarking that "this is supposed to be a library". Staff would generally not remonstrate with him or with those causing the noise, choosing instead to not get involved, and the incidents would normally pass quickly. It is significant, however, that the desire for peace and tranquillity could, conversely, be a source of disharmony.

If the users outlined in previous sections were conspicuous and active members of the library community, their equivalents outlined in this section can be described as more passive but no less protective of the environment. Mr Grumpy, as a good example, still wanted to enjoy the rights of library membership – the peace and quiet, access to resources – undisturbed. In the same way, the worker from the aluminium plant came to the branch to benefit from its surroundings and serenity. Neither, however, contributed towards the active

community of the branch in the same way Reg's gang did, and they felt no responsibility to do so. That does not make them inferior library users (indeed, the return to the last chapter's theme, the fact that they generated issue statistics made them very welcome to staff); it simply marks a difference between how they used the branch compared with others.

This poses an interesting question about library policy. The temptation within policy has been to stress the importance of community participation in the sense of the formal, organised activities outlined earlier. This has led to an emphasis on libraries promoting "a culture of participation", and "informal social opportunities" being identified as the "features of a flourishing community information environment" (DCMS, 1999: 10). In some cases, this has led to suggestions that libraries should be made less 'libraryish' so they can become more attractive spaces for social interaction:

Libraries need to re-double their efforts to reach non-users. One route to non-users is through collaboration with other public services, for example by co-locating public libraries with other services such as education, social services, health or leisure services. (CyMAL, 2008: 9b)

The implication is that libraries, by themselves, hold insufficient allure to attract non-users unless they can be linked with other, more appealing or necessary, elements of state provision. The last Secretary of State for Culture also criticised "the stereotype of dusty books and silence" in the public library (DCMS, 2008b).

As the examples above illustrate, however, 'community' can also entail more discreet elements such as someone being able to come into a free and accessible public space to read a book or newspaper, or to sit and use a computer in peace and quiet. Furthermore, there are still many users (of all generations) for whom the quiet solitude of a public library holds an allure (Hanley, 2008).

Part of the service's attraction lies in the fact that 'libraryness' evokes an impression of calmness and harmony; the 'companionable silence' mentioned earlier. This has led to "libraries... in some senses [being] seen as quasi-sacred places" (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 51). Amongst the most loyal regulars at Llancarreg, there was a commonly-held view that the library was more akin to a

book purists' second-hand bookshop than to, say, a community centre or even a modern bookshop:

“Even those of us who don’t read so much anymore come here because it’s a place where we can be at ease with each other. There’s no pressure to chat if you don’t want to, but you can if you want. You don’t have to borrow anything either – they [staff] are just happy to see you.” (Madge, retired regular)

“I can read a book at home if I want, or I can go to my mum’s if I want to use the internet – but I’d rather come here because of the people... I might not talk to people, and they might not talk to me, but I can get on with it and do my own thing.” (Jez, unemployed semi-regular)

While interaction and visible manifestations of community involvement may well (and do) form part of the library’s output, the “public place, private space” (Black & Crann, 2002: 154) aspect of provision is just as apparent and just as valid. For Madge and Jez, the opportunity of contact is important, even if the desire to actively seek it is absent.

That is not to say that the branch library as an institution is unproblematic as a site for civic engagement. By definition, its role is somewhat parochial compared to a city-centre library which is specifically designed to be a place for civic engagement, and a source of civic pride:

The local dimensions of liberal community were most apparent in the municipal library... in the centre of town... This central library was the showplace of the other libraries in of the town or city... They were to be specially designed buildings... shaped by the interests of civic leaders, rather than the active proponents of the library, and were designed to exemplify civic identity and proper civic behaviour. (Joyce, 2003: 135)

What exactly is meant by ‘proper civic behaviour’ is open to interpretation, but there is little doubt that the city centre library in many cases is a more impressive expression of civic identity. As earlier chapters have argued, branch libraries are by and large more utilitarian and less prestigious; this makes them ideal sites for studying everyday life, but it equally makes them less fitting as sites for citizenship. Nevertheless, the public library in all its forms has still played its role in developing notions of civic identity:

...the service encourages civic engagement by bringing citizens together, that it upholds democratic ideals by making information freely available to all citizens, that it bridges social capital by engaging in partnerships with other community organisations, and that it fosters community participation in a public space (Birdi, Wilson & Cocker, 2008: 583)

This links in with classical notions of citizenship (Marshall, 1950), and central to that is the importance of physical space in which that citizenship can be expressed. The library offers a physical expression of civic identity and, moreover, provides a material outlet for civic expression. For the ‘companionable silence’ group of library users, this may not be as important or as apparent as it is for their more vocal and conspicuous counterparts in other groups, but it is nevertheless an arena upon which they can project their own sets of values and ideals. In that sense, the library is still a site for communal and civic expression

Having outlined the three main trends of communal expression within the branch at Llancarreg, I will now summarise the main themes and offer some thoughts of the importance of the public branch library in providing a physical institution to foster such expression.

6.4: Conclusions

The previous chapter focused on the staff and the workplace culture of the public library; this chapter shifted the focus onto the users of the branch and has outlined the predominant users groups, what defined them and how they used the branch. In doing so, the nature of community has been explored through considering the similarities and differences of the people within those groups and how each group expressed itself within the space of the library. The chapter also referred to the library service’s role as a space to foster citizenship and civic engagement. The social interactions and community expression which the branch library cultivated were an important element of its appeal, and accounted at least partly for its social significance as a public space. This particular theme will be explored further in Chapter 8 in relation to wider policy issues.

What is significant about the branch library at Llancarreg, and which may be true of other libraries, is how the physical arena of the library allowed and fostered communal and civic interactions which might not otherwise have occurred. This was conspicuously the case for the organised activities of the branch – by definition, the library-based activities were linked to part of the branch's output; the IT class and the storytime session are part of the “usual features” of a typical library (Hayes & Morris, 2005: 132). Nevertheless, it is still significant that these events, which could have just as easily taken place in another location (an adult education class, a community centre, a leisure centre) were core parts of the public library and were identified and valued as such by users.

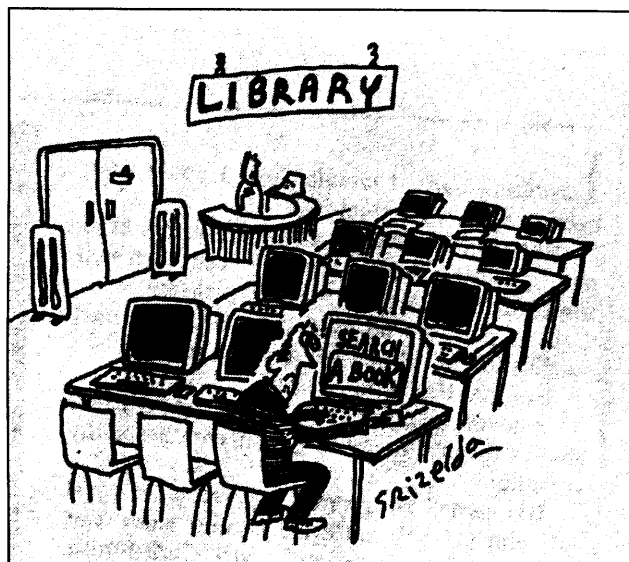
More significant are the informal interactions which took place in the branch and the sense of togetherness and belonging which they offered (and which were replicated as well for the ‘companionable silence’ group). These chance encounters and conversational exchanges may have appeared at first glance to be relatively trivial – but in fact, as I have demonstrated, they form a key (but often unrecognised) part of the library service's agenda towards social inclusion (DCMS, 1999, 2001) and community engagement (CyMAL, 2008a; DCMS, 2003). This is especially true for the ‘companionable silence’ group, for whom the library offered a place for quiet immersion in a particular activity amongst other like-minded users. At a time when government is keen to modernise the service to allow users to feel more able to talk and use mobile phones in libraries (Brown, 2008; DCMS, 2008b; Hanley, 2008), it is interesting to consider what effect(s) this might have on the group of users who value very different elements of the library space. The following chapters will touch on this in more detail.

This chapter has also outlined the library's practical role in relation to civic engagement and shown how difficult it is to disentangle this role from conceptualisations of community and social interaction. The branch library may experience expressions of citizenship which are easily recognisable – the fieldnote in Chapter 2 about the petition in the branch against the late opening of a nearby pub, or the historical instance explained in Chapter 4 of Reg's gang campaigning

to save the branch are two obvious examples. Yet the more frequent, everyday occurrences – of two users sharing views on a local news story in the paper, or a couple of regulars passing on information about another’s poor health and resolving to visit them – could just as easily be mistaken for idle gossip. In actual fact, these instances represent civic expression and citizenship in action at an everyday street level. Again, the role of the library as a location for this is critical – as a recognised public landmark, and one which citizens can enter for nothing without any obligations, it provides a value-free and democratic site for such interactions. Again, this is a theme which later chapters (particularly Chapter 8) will examine more closely.

The next chapter will turn attention towards the place of the public library within the modern world by examining some of the challenges and difficulties the service faces. In particular, the increasing (but at times controversial) prevalence of ICT and the pressures of consumer culture will be explored, as will the library service’s response to them.

7. A traditional library in the modern era: adapting to technology and change



Cartoon in *Private Eye* no. 1128, 18th March 2005

This chapter will explore the ways in which the branch library, as a traditional, everyday public service is adapting to the challenges of the modern era. In particular, the chapter will focus on the ever-increasing importance attached to technology and how this was manifested in the branch library at Llancarreg. It will also examine some of the routine ways in which the branch sought to attract and retain users through marketing devices. Specific attention is also paid to how the library adopted and modified consumerist practices from other sectors to try and improve its service. By examining these two themes of technology and self-promotion together, the chapter contributes to some of the policy debates about how the library service can carve out a modern niche for its services and where its contemporary role lies (eg, Davies, 2008; DCMS, 2008b; Goulding, 2006a; Usherwood *et al*, 2005).

These are by no means new questions for the public library service. Wainwright (1966), amongst others, foresaw the challenges which the modern library service would face. He speculated that the library would need to adapt and provide greater guidance and assistance for users, and that even the terminology

used to describe those users ('patrons', 'users', 'customers') would become contested (a theme explored later in this chapter). In the current era, these challenges still exist and have arguably become more stark, with government reviews aiming to tackle what they see as a library service in need of modernisation (DCMS, 2008b). Libraries have attracted criticism for not reacting quickly enough to the shifting patterns of demand upon the service (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; Leadbeater, 2002; Coates, 2004). Even when good practice has emerged, it has often happened in small pockets of reform rather than across the service as a whole (Anderson, 2007) and reaction to it has often been mixed (Black, 2000; Black & Crann, 2002). The difficult task the service faces is how best to balance the objectives of providing a traditional, knowledge-based service in ways which are appealing and relevant to the widest possible set of users.

It is these issues which form the basis of this chapter. I want to begin by exploring the role of IT provision in the branch library at Llancarreg, because it serves as a useful microcosm of some of the wider issues. For one thing, at a straightforward level it is emblematic of the library's approach towards new services and says a great deal about how the library welcomes or eschews the challenges of technology and of the modern world at large. Examining IT also provides an entry point to a whole variety of other issues – for example, how and when the library censors information (perhaps through barring certain websites) or limits access to services. It is also a valuable way to examine how the library displays and promotes services towards younger users who – typically – are less likely to be members of a branch; the provision of IT plays a key role in engaging younger users (DCMS, 2008a). For these reasons, the first section of this chapter will begin by expanding on IT provision at Llancarreg and exploring some of the issues around it. In particular, I focus on the attitudes towards IT of the staff responsible for promoting it, and the users who most frequently made use of it. I will then move on to look at the library patrons who might in theory have been target users of IT, but who did not use the facilities, and I will explore some of the reasons why this was the case. I will conclude by exploring further some of the underlying issues around IT provision. In doing so, I hope to highlight the tensions within the library about where technology fits in with the service's ethos.

This discussion of IT is followed by an examination of what can loosely be described as ‘customer culture’ in Llanccarreg; specifically, where the branch sat in terms of attracting, retaining and defining its ‘customers’, and what it learnt (and indeed what it chose to ignore) from other sectors when it came to customer relations. In essence, the question this section will seek to address is:

A combination of numerous bookshops, cheap book prices and decades of growing affluence has led much of the reading public to buy where once we would have borrowed. Does a good old-fashioned public library belong to a bygone era? (Wilkinson, 2008: 6)

In particular, I will seek to contribute towards an understanding of the ways in which policy ambitions for marketised, consumer-orientated public services are interpreted and enacted at the front-line, and how the practicalities of these ambitions are managed. The discussion will also develop the emerging theme of a traditional service adapting to carve out a niche for itself in the modern world.

7.1: “It’s not a toy!” – IT use at Llanccarreg

The fieldnote extract below describes one IT class in the branch at Llanccarreg and offers some indications of how staff viewed information technology. It also introduces some of the wider issues around technology which the section will go on to explore in more detail.

7.1.1: IT users

The following fieldnote details one example of an IT class at Llanccarreg library. The extract is, I feel, representative of the classes at the branch which I observed during the fieldwork, and combines many of the fundamental themes of the classes. The extract focuses less on the actual mechanics and content of the class (some of which have already been detailed in Chapter 6), and rather more on the direction of the discussion around it and some of the presumptions of the learners and instructor about technology.

The weekly IT class will shortly be starting at its usual time on a Thursday morning. This week marks the start of a new initiation for the

IT class – there are two courses offered by the library, each lasting four weeks and running alternately, one being an introduction to basic IT, and the other being an introduction to the internet. This week's class is the first session of the introduction to the internet course, and means a new set of 'pupils' will be taking part.

Ten minutes before the start time, the first of the new group of pupils comes in, introduces himself to Mark at the issue desk and takes a seat in the computer section of the branch which has been kept free by Mark this morning in preparation for the class. The new gentleman, Keith, is a semi-regular at the branch (I have seen him in here several times before, although he is not, to my knowledge, a member of any of the social groups who meet in the library who often take part in the IT sessions). He is in his late 60s or maybe his 70s, smartly dressed in a sports jacket and neatly-pressed shirt, and while he waits for the other pupils to arrive, he flicks through some of the leaflets by the computer and makes notes in a small pad.

He is joined presently by two female regulars, Evie and Kathleen; the pair are sisters who come to the library at least once a week, sometimes together and sometimes separately but with a list of books to borrow/return for the other. They recently 'graduated' from the basic IT introduction course, and are here today to follow it up with the second course. Both are retired and live on the same street as the Llancarreg branch, so the library for them is both a handy meeting point and also their closest local amenity. They are also both putative members of Reg's 'gang' – they know many of its main protagonists and often get drawn into the conversations on the Monday morning semi-formal meet-up. They also, it emerges, know Keith, and the three spend quarter of an hour chatting idly about last night's television and waiting for the class teacher to arrive.

The instructor for today's course is Hayley, one of the more infrequent members of the Llancarreg team, who has started to take the classes in the last few months to ease Clarrie's workload. When she arrives, she profusely apologises to her three pupils for being slightly late, and tells them that "this week's session doesn't take too long anyway, as it's mainly just an introduction to the basics of the internet – the more complex bits will come next week". And with that, she disappears into the back room to take off her coat and get her teaching file so the class can get started in earnest.

In actual fact, it still takes a further fifteen minutes for the class to start, as the pupils and Hayley get embroiled in a conversation about workmen. Kathleen has been having problems with the stream of repair men who have been unable to fix her washing machine, and she bemoans the inconvenience and the endless cups of tea she has been making for her builders; Keith counters this with his own tale of woe about a dodgy washing machine he bought recently – after much deliberation, the four agree that Currys are more reliable than Comet

at fitting washing machines, but much more expensive. This sort of procrastination in the IT class is commonplace – indeed, most of the classes in Llancarreg will only start after an extended session of chatter about the topic of the day, and the class teachers seem to almost expect it (and are frequently, as today, willing participants in the conversation).

When the class does finally begin, it follows the same formula as usual – Hayley starts the class by explaining the concept of internet search engines, painstakingly pointing out that one doesn't have to pay to use Google. This is new information for these pupils, and is not therefore wasted or in the least bit patronising, even if Mark's wry smile at the issue desk suggests that he considers it to be so.

This is quite in-keeping with the usual blueprint for the class – to many detached observers, much of what is taught is very basic, almost self-evident. For the majority of the pupils, however, the concepts are unfamiliar and the classes go at a pace which has made them accessible and popular.

What becomes particularly striking about this week's class is the way that Hayley opens up about her own views on the internet and technology during the course of the conversations and chatter. She starts by revealing that she doesn't have broadband for her own home internet connection, relying instead on dial-up. She also explains that she struggles to understand some elements of how the internet works (referring, somewhat superficially, to "the difference between human language and computer language" and how she struggles to bridge the gap between the two). When the discussion turns to shopping on the internet, she says she tries to avoid buying things online whenever possible because of fears over internet security.

Later, in answer to a question about how search engines work so quickly, she says: "I'm no tecchy, so I won't pretend to know! I'm just explaining things as best I can". Later still, during a discussion about how central the internet has become to modern life, she adds: "it'd probably do society good if the whole [computer] system just crashed for a few months!"

When the main content of this week's class has almost all been imparted, the informal discussion turns to what the pupils see as the decline of society as a whole. They voice concerns over youth crime (even though Llancarreg is by-and-large a 'safe' suburb; they bemoan the impersonality of modern life, from call centres to online banking; and they reiterate that they are doing this course because they feel 'left behind' by elements of the modern world. To each of these grumbles, Hayley responds sympathetically, saying "well, that's just the way society is going" and "things have been on the slide, heading this way, for the last twenty years".

By the time the class ends, the pupils (along with their teacher) have well and truly put the world to rights. They have learnt the rudimentaries of the internet but also learnt to fear it for its potential deviance; they have learnt how e-mail is a quick and easy method of communication, but how it can be unreliable and can produce 'spam' from untrustworthy sources; and they have learnt that computers are easier for people to use than they thought whilst agreeing amongst themselves that this has made the world a more impersonal, imperfect and insincere place. They leave the class with their knowledge and skills advanced, but also their prejudices about computers, technology and modern life reinforced.

This description may well read as a slightly exasperated account of the IT class, casting the teaching of IT in a negative light. It does, however, illustrate some of the key elements around IT provision in Llancarreg. For one thing, it shows the library service promoting and explaining technology to users by hosting and teaching such classes. It also, however, underlines the extent to which those classes are heavily dependent on the attitude and outlook of the individual(s) charged with facilitating them.

It is in this sense that the fieldnote demonstrates some of the mixed messages which the branch gave out about the place of technology within the modern library setting. The very presence of the class showed that IT was valued and that the local authority, via the public library, felt it important that users (particularly older users) got a chance to learn about computers, technology and the 'information superhighway'. The way in which it was taught, however, came from almost the polar opposite perspective – Hayley's sceptical and wary standpoint arguably over-emphasised the shortcomings of IT. For example, when the class spent time discussing the dangers of the internet (in relation to internet shopping and the threat of 'spam' e-mails), no advice was offered on how to counteract those dangers or gauge the risks involved; by leaving out that element, learners were told only of the risks of technology rather than being given ways of negotiating those risks.

This approach was by no means restricted just to the formal environment of the IT classes. It was quite common for the older users of the IT facilities to have conversations about the dangers of the internet, often based on stories in the

local paper. Equally, Clarrie was frequently asked by less-experienced computer users whether or not she thought a certain e-mail was 'spam' rather than a genuine offer from a Nigerian general to enter into a lucrative business relationship. Some of the older users would often also advise each other to shop around for good deals on the internet (for holidays, for insurance and so on) but not to actually buy things online because of the risk of fraud. Such instances were frequent enough to suggest an undercurrent of scepticism about technology and the internet amongst a sizeable proportion of Llancarreg's users. Seeing that same wariness translated into the more official setting of the IT class is significant, indicating as it does that this view of technology as potentially dangerous was being formally communicated to learners. It is for this reason that the fieldnote above is of greater relevance than the instances from less formal situations in the library.

Hayley's teaching technique can of course be interpreted in different ways. On one level, her method for teaching was well-suited to the groups of learners who were, by and large, made up of pensioners. The groups were often sceptical (or at the very least nervous) about using new technology; Hayley, by adopting the same tone and teaching in a relaxed, discursive style, put them at their ease by mirroring their reticence. By allowing the conversation to flow amongst participants and encouraging discussion, the regular 'horror stories' of technology going wrong which the group would recount allowed her to frame the course within a context with which the pupils were familiar and could identify. To these learners, this approach was often welcomed, with pupils commenting on how they found the course to work at their level. When Hayley confessed to her concerns over buying online because of internet security, it prompted a deluge of stories from Kathleen, Evie and Keith of newspaper reports they had read about people's personal details being given away, and credit card fraud emanating from fraudulent online stores. Regardless of whether or not such stories are a true reflection of the internet era, they were (to these particular learners) truths which were universally acknowledged, and fitted into their narrative of modern technology needing to be treated with caution.

In this respect, Hayley's acknowledged lack of technical experience could be viewed as an advantage because it enabled her to have a greater degree of

empathy with the class. Moreover, it meant that the classes were extremely basic in their approach, covering IT at an introductory level for complete novices. This clearly had its benefits – the classes were popular and had a substantial waiting list of participants; the learners (almost without exception) were pensioners with little or no knowledge of computers who found the courses suited to their needs. Many of the pupils who completed the courses would then use the computers on their frequent trips to the library, sometimes only to practice or ‘keep their arm in’, but nevertheless they were doing something in the library which previously they might not have done. Hayley also had a knack for teaching IT with only the most infrequent recourse to technical language and jargon, meaning that learners were rarely baffled by unfamiliar terminology.

Yet I felt from watching this class and others like it that the IT course was taught in such a way that staff reinforced the prevailing reticence amongst users about technology rather than exhibiting the ‘missionary zeal’ of the reforming, educating, progressive library professional as a “knowledge navigator” (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 129). Hayley acknowledged that: “I’m no ‘tecchy’, so I won’t pretend to know everything! I’m just explaining things as best I can”, and in doing so illustrated that library staff who were charged with the role of taking the IT classes were not necessarily the ideal choice to do so. She expanded on this a point in a later discussion: “Us librarians aren’t really qualified to teach this [IT class] but I think that’s why they [management] get us to do it – we can put it in terms that people understand.”

While this was undoubtedly true, putting lay experts in charge of the branch’s IT provision created some problems for the local library service, particularly when it came to dealing with users whose requirements were more sophisticated. These problems and limitations will now be explored.

7.1.2: IT non-users and IT limitations

If the IT classes, and those who participated in them, demonstrate one element of the library service’s approach to technology, then those users who eschewed the

facilities on offer at the library are equally as illustrative of other elements. Those users who were proficient at using the technology but who did not come to the library to make use of it reveal some of the other factors within the branch which had an impact on the promotion of technology and the promotion of the library as a whole.

For example, there were several semi-regulars who used the branch at Llancarreg to search for jobs (either by searching through the local paper, or by looking online), who were younger than the niche group of retired regulars who dominated the IT classes. Amongst them was Jez, a man in his thirties who lived with his mother (who would often accompany him to the branch to help him look for work). Jez was sufficiently IT-literate to be able to check his e-mail and type application letters, but had no formal IT qualification which he could add to his CV. For him, his local library branch could offer little by way of assistance – to take a formal IT qualification like a GCSE or an ECDL course, he would have had to find a night class or travel to the city-centre. As he put it:

“It’s not that I can’t take a course to learn what I want; it’s just that I can’t do it here where it’s familiar and easier for me to get to... All they offer is the really basic stuff, which is okay for gettin’ you started, but it’s not enough if you want to get a job with it.” (Jez, unemployed semi-regular)

For users like Jez, the library provided the right IT facilities, and these were certainly used, but the formal means for developing skills stretched only as far as basic introductory classes. The crucial point here is around literacy and how it was interpreted. Whereas the branch staff understood that part of their role was to comprehensively develop literacy in relation to reading (Molly, for example, commented that: “We take pride in finding books that people can cope with and that are right for their level”), this was not reflected in how they developed computer literacy, even if they appreciated that IT provision was a key component of the library’s modern role. Of course, the IT classes were a step towards improving computer literacy – but, crucially, these were pitched solely towards novice users rather than offering a more holistic range of classes to cover the broader spectrum of users’ abilities.

This unbalanced approach was reflected in other ways as well. There were a very small number of teenagers who were regulars at Llancarreg, and for whom IT use constituted the main attraction of the library. The majority of their peer group, however, were virtually never seen in the branch – preferring instead to congregate either on the recreation ground in ‘Upper Llan’ or to travel the two miles to the adjacent suburb where there was an internet café. It is significant that for this group, the internet café offered something which the library did not. The library, for many of the group, lay closer to their homes and was a free resource, and yet the group would walk further afield and pay to use IT facilities which they felt were more appealing. This is significant, and offers an insight into why the library’s facilities were under-used by this target group.

For one thing, the computer facilities at Llancarreg library were restricted in several ways. Firstly, use was time-limited to two hours per user per day, meaning that the group could not spend three to four hours in the branch with each of them having a computer to themselves, as would be the case at the internet café. Clarrie frequently relaxed the two hour rule for her regular users on quiet days (I would often take the opportunity, when offered, of an extra half hour or so if I was typing up fieldnotes); but this was rare and only ever offered to a small number of users. Another key difference was what library computer users could and could not do whilst using the facilities. Restricting access to certain websites is nothing new for the library service (Hannabuss & Allard, 2001; McNicol, 2006), but deciding what sites to restrict and what sites to allow denotes a view of what constitutes ‘proper’ material. Llancarreg’s local authority was more relaxed than some in relation to restricting sites – a neighbouring authority deemed that social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook were ‘unsuitable’ and prevented users from accessing them – but even in Llancarreg there were still some restrictions which younger users felt to be arbitrary and unnecessary. For example, the video-sharing site YouTube was deemed ‘inappropriate’ regardless of what content one might have been intending to view. When Jez tried to access the site so he could view the goals from the previous weekend’s football, he found he was unable to do so because of the software which restricted certain types of website; Clarrie, when challenged, said that “it’s

just the way it is; people could end up looking at anything, so it's best to filter it all out and be on the safe side".⁶¹ It is tempting to wonder what the branch's book stock would have been like if the same logic were applied and anything controversial or potentially offensive was removed.

The internet café, by contrast, had no restrictions on what users could access; as Richie,⁶² who ran the café, put it: "You pays your money, you looks at what you want. Makes no difference to me". The restrictions placed on use at the IT café were negligible compared to those at the library, and the financial cost was seen to be a price worth paying (literally) in light of the extra benefits it conferred. In contrast, Llanccarreg library was considered to be restrictive in what it allowed, even if the rationale for making some of those restrictions was not unreasonable. Much the same has been suggested by McNicol (2006) in a focus group study of teenagers' views of censorship in libraries. In that research, two-thirds of librarians agreed that access to controversial websites should be controlled, and this was sometimes reflected by the young people themselves – however, the filtering systems which do this were recognised as being crude and unsophisticated. The same was true of Llanccarreg – benign internet use was frequently curbed by the filtering system designed to prohibit malignant browsing.

Moreover, the thorny issue of censorship served to divide users by making younger residents of Llanccarreg feel that the branch was designed to restrain their use in particular. The library's historical reputation has been built on the principles of "providing access to information in a morally neutral manner... without regard to whether that information might be used for nefarious purposes" (Anderson, 2007: 99/100), but the rise of IT facilities has resulted in libraries

⁶¹ I should note here that the censorship policy was made at a higher level within the service than Clarrie; in this instance, she was just offering her view on the policy rather than offering any sort of explanation of how it had been devised.

⁶² I visited the internet café on several occasions on my way either to or from the library at Llanccarreg. As time went on and I realised that many of the younger residents of Llanccarreg used the café rather than the library to check e-mails and surf the internet, I took the opportunity of carrying out a short interview with Richie on why he thought this was. Although not part of the fieldnotes from Llanccarreg library itself, I use some of the information here because of its relevance to the discussion.

taking difficult decisions to censor or limit access to online material which could be construed as potentially damaging or unsuitable. The net result has been that young people in particular have been adversely affected by the resulting censorship, finding apparently arbitrary decisions of what is and is not 'suitable' to be objectionable (McNicol, 2006).

The internet café also had one other attraction which the library did not, and which was crucial in attracting users away from Llancarreg – it offered computer games, and specifically X-Box console games, to its patrons. The front of the internet café was dominated by a large sofa which faced a huge widescreen television connected to an X-Box. This sofa played host to half a dozen boys (always, without exception, boys) and was occupied virtually without a break from opening at 10am to closing at 6pm during the school holidays. In comparison, Llancarreg library could not hope to compete. Users were allowed to play Flash games on the internet (and, to the younger users, this was a viable attraction), but anything beyond that was simply not seen as part of the branch's role.

Again, however, the distinction here is interesting – if one takes the view that the X-Box is a pure form of technological entertainment, it is arguably no less worthy than a cheap Mills & Boon paperback which has little literary merit but is regularly borrowed in the branch for its purely entertainment value. One form of entertainment was considered valuable (perhaps not least because it boosted issue statistics – see Chapter 5), whilst another would not even be contemplated as being a desirable part of the library.

Even when the branch did reach out and offer technology which was cutting-edge, access to it was sometimes unequal:

In the last few days, a sign has gone up by the computer area advertising the opportunity for users to be taught how to use Video Mail facilities at a neighbouring branch. The sign says that three sessions will be held over the coming month for users to be shown how to use Video Mail, each session lasting for half an hour. The sign also says that the sessions are open to all, except for under-18s.

This is interesting, and says something about the library's attitude towards new technology – Video Mail is a recent acquisition to the service's facilities (many of the neighbouring local authorities don't offer the facility at all), and they are keen to promote it. At the same time, however, they have chosen to curb its use by one sub-group of users who might potentially be interested in accessing it. Many of the typical IT class pupils struggle to get to grips with the rudimentary elements of IT and the internet, and it is hard to imagine them clamouring for access to Video Mail. By contrast, younger users have expressed an interest in these sorts of facilities before (and one teenage girl recently asked Clarrie if she could use her portable webcam on the library computers – a request which was politely turned down).

I ask Clarrie about the sign, and enquire whether she knows why under-18s have been excluded from the session; she doesn't know, but gives me an e-mail address for the authority's IT Co-Ordinator and suggests that I ask him. When he replies to my e-mail a few days later, he responds as follows:

"We are currently piloting webcam services with a view to seeing the extent of interest our clients may have in such services and testing the technical set up of our network to make any necessary adjustments to enable the services to run over our network. If the pilot is considered a success we will review the scope of the services we are able to offer and during these discussions we will consider who will be eligible to use the services offered. As with any policy we make we consult with relevant groups and agencies and look at best practice in other authorities. Thank you for taking the time to express an interest in our services."

The course went ahead a few weeks later, as planned, without any under-18s taking part. The incident, and in particular the reply from the IT Co-ordinator, underlined the caution shown by the library service in promoting modern technology to a younger generation of potential users. Aside from the jargon stereotypically beloved by the council official ("clients", "scope", "relevant groups and agencies", "best practice"), the reply also misses the point – the pilot scheme, ostensibly set up to gauge interest amongst users and to allow technical teething issues to be addressed, excluded the group most likely to be interested in it and whose use would be most likely to create technical challenges. To refer back to one of the themes of the previous chapter momentarily, this connects with some important issues around civic identity, with younger people being seen as "citizens in the making" (Marshall, 1950: 25), and somehow less legitimate as

users of public services. It also serves to highlight the emerging theme from the data outlined so far in this chapter; namely that the biggest fear with IT facilities and technology was that it would in some way be abused, often regardless of whether or not there was any evidence to support this concern. Indeed, it is to that issue which I will now attend.

7.1.3: Technology as a 'serious pursuit'

At one point early on in the fieldwork, Clarrie rebuked a child of maybe 4 or 5 who was sat at a computer whilst its mother browsed books; the child was not logged on to the computer, but was hitting the keyboard, waving the mouse around and pretending to be using it. Clarrie's gentle reprimand was to say: "Be careful with that thing [the computer] – it's not a toy!". That statement almost perfectly encapsulated the library's attitude to computers and technology – they were expensive (hence Clarrie's particular concern in this instance), potentially technically complex, and not something to be used by those who would not respect them (hence the reluctance to allow children to access certain software or websites). The dominant view amongst staff was that they were chiefly designated for 'serious' pursuits, and I want to take this as my starting-point for discussion.

Computers represent a key component of the library's service – they are accessed regularly, they provide a useful attraction through IT classes, and they theoretically hold a mass appeal to both young and old users, albeit for different reasons. Yet their role in Llancarreg remained an understated one – with staff, and many users, not really having a firm idea of where they fitted into the library's ethos. The net result, some have argued, is that IT has gained a foothold in the library service for the wrong reasons – namely, to keep libraries (and librarians) 'useful' in the modern era, rather than because of the intrinsic benefits that the technology offers: "In an effort to defend their professionalism... librarians perhaps not surprisingly embraced the information society as a means of buttressing their precarious occupational position" (Black, 2000: 156).

While that critique was not entirely supported by my observations at Llancarreg, what was apparent was that there appeared to be little strategic

promotion or development of IT in the branch. The IT classes for older users were popular – but they were also conspicuous for being the only regular, formal means of training for users. Those who had good IT skills (such as the local teenagers) went elsewhere to use them; meanwhile, those who had some limited skills but wanted to develop them (such as Jez) were left unfulfilled by what the library had to offer. Even where extra tuition was offered, as with the video mail trial, it was often small-scale and limited.

As a result, the restrictions on the available technology were played out at Llancarreg along age lines. Older users, typically, were more likely to lack the capabilities to use the technology at all, while younger users often shunned the facilities because they felt that the constraints placed upon use were unreasonable. This age divide was significant, with both ends of the age spectrum arguably being poorly-served by what was on offer. For example, the range of CDs and DVDs which the branch stocked were mostly (although not entirely) aimed at a younger audience – the majority of CDs were recent releases of mainstream contemporary artists, and DVDs tended to be blockbuster hits rather than more obscure or older releases. Loans of these items to older users were generally low (in common with the service as a whole – see Hayes & Morris, 2005) either because the material was not to their taste or because the format was too modern for their equipment. More surprisingly, loans to younger users were also low – in their case, partly because there were relatively few young users anyway and partly because the mainstream collection offered little that could not be bought cheaply elsewhere, but also because the material and formats were not contemporary enough to be seen as desirable. Young users were restricted from accessing certain file-sharing websites for fear of them downloading MP3s or movies (either legitimately or illegally), and yet because they were unable to do this, the young users turned their back on the branch's music and film collection as a whole. Thus, the CD and DVD collections (which represented a significant investment on the part of the library service) ended up not particularly satisfying either of these particular constituencies.

This picture was replicated elsewhere in the branch. When Clarrie and Molly decided one day to throw out a thesaurus from the collection because “no-

one uses them anymore, what with Microsoft Word and the internet” (as Molly put it), they betrayed both ends of the age spectrum. The younger users who were most likely to eschew the printed edition for an online counterpart seldom (if ever) used the branch as a place for work, whilst older users who were unfamiliar with the computer-based equivalents may well have had a use for the book.

Where the older users were given the opportunity to use the computers through being taught skills at the IT class, they did become more regular users of the facilities – but here again is a critical difference. The older IT users would generally use the facilities for activities such as writing e-mails, research (particularly genealogy) and in some cases online shopping; younger users, by contrast, more typically used the computers for leisure activities such as social networking, instant messaging and games (where these were allowed). Significantly, the latter were seen as less legitimate activities:

“I had to kick some kids off [the computers] yesterday. They were just messing around on Facebook and stuff, and there was a long queue of people wanting to send e-mails and things like that. They didn’t like it; I think I made a few enemies there. But you’ve got to draw the line, haven’t you?” (Mark, in conversation to Clarrie)

That distinction about where to ‘draw the line’ further signified the extent to which IT facilities and technology were seen as ‘serious pursuits’ and part of the library’s educational/cultural agenda rather than part of its recreational provision. This distinction been discussed elsewhere, but in other areas the emphasis was predominantly on leisure and recreation – hence the imbalance towards providing light literature over reference books, the relaxed and chatty feel of the storytime sessions, and the battles over making the work area of the branch more homely.

Yet with IT, provision seemed to be geared in the opposite direction – websites which were considered in some way frivolous were restricted, gaming software was rejected, use of hardware such as webcams was prohibited beyond recognised courses where it could be (and was) regulated. The underlying ethos behind those decisions gave the impression that whilst the rest of the branch was a

space of leisure and even fun, the computers were to be used ‘properly’ (even if the messages about what constituted ‘proper’ use were sometimes mixed).

The self-image of Llancarreg library in this respect (and possibly also that of the public library at large) is therefore a confused one. In its traditional role of lending books, the library service has altered its provision to reflect a more recreational use to those wanting to borrow a light paperback novel (as Chapter 5 discussed). Yet in its more modern role as a key component of the ‘People’s Network’ programme to create IT learning centres across the UK (DCMS, 2003), the service has taken a more serious role in which technology is something to be used ‘properly’ (however interpreted). The idea of new technology ‘not being a toy’ is at odds with the majority of the service where the library has had its image deliberately softened in recent decades to make it user-friendly, pleasurable and fun (Black, 2000; DCMS, 2008b) in an attempt to move the public library from being a “temple of knowledge” to being “the ‘living room in the city’” (Resource, 2003: 4).

It is this ‘softening’ of the library’s image which will now be explored in greater depth, through a discussion of Llancarreg’s more general efforts towards consumerism and self-promotion.

7.2: Llancarreg as a customer-focused library

The Llancarreg branch, like many branch libraries, made efforts to ‘sell’ itself as a relevant, vibrant and important public service in a modern world where cheap books and widespread home internet access rivalled its traditional services. At the same time, the roots of the library service and its traditions sometimes made the branch ill-equipped to deal with users who expected a great deal of one small branch in an unremarkable city suburb.

The challenge for the branch at Llancarreg – and the wider challenge for the library service as a whole – is how to meet those expectations and how to convey a coherent and attractive vision of what the public library is for. It is here that the library service has tried to adopt practices from elsewhere. Rather than

being able to just passively provide a service, it has in recent years had to promote itself and its facilities, often by branding and packaging them as something more attractive (see, for example, CyMAL, 2006 and DCMS, 2008b as instances of government seeking ways to ‘re-brand’ certain services). One practical example is the way in which the library has blurred the distinction between learning and leisure to make the educational ambitions of the service more palatable (a theme which will be developed in the next chapter).

At Llancarreg, some of the ways in which the branch tried to operate a popular, user-focused service were practical, branch-level ideas (some of which worked, and some of which did not), whilst others were service-wide initiatives, interpreted at ground-level but performed on a wider basis. I have termed these attempts as ‘consumerism’, more as a shorthand means of describing a wider set of ambitions than as a strict description. What the library was attempting to do was to promote itself and advertise its services; attract, welcome and retain users – not strictly ‘consumerist’ ideals, as there was no commercial or marketised element to the activities taking place (Hilton, 2003; Miles, 1998), but nonetheless these were attempts to ‘sell’ knowledge. If some of the elements of ‘libraryness’ espouse rather cosy ambitions around intellectual freedom, or courageous aims towards civic engagement, then ‘selling knowledge’ or ‘selling leisure’ represent the service’s most pressing aspirations to preserve and promote its own role. Whilst acknowledging that labelling these ambitions as ‘consumerist’ is somewhat imprecise, I hope I have still made clear what it is that I mean by the term in this particular context.

This section will begin by examining some of the localised examples of these practices emanating from Llancarreg library specifically, before going on to consider wider initiatives and how they were interpreted at ground-level in the branch. By means of an introduction, the following passage of ethnographic description⁶³ considers the welcome given to users at Llancarreg from the moment they entered the library door:

⁶³ As with the description in Chapter 5 (p. 105), this is not a fieldnote in the same sense as those which have appeared elsewhere in these chapters. It was, however, written contemporaneously with the ‘raw’ fieldnotes to describe particular elements of library

The layout of the branch at Llanccarreg has one main benefit for the staff – the front entrance for users leads them directly in front of the issue desk and directly into the view of library staff. While that layout is partly accidental (the desk has to be adjacent to the entry to the rear office and ‘backstage area’), it gives staff the opportunity to see and greet visitors to the library as soon as they come in.

The customer service potential of this is considerable, but it also has potential to work in the opposite way – after all, a visitor can as quickly be made to feel unwelcome as they can be made to feel welcome. This is particularly true within the library service, where the hackneyed stereotype of a stern-looking, hatchet-faced librarian, operating a rigid ‘Silence Please’ library regime is still drawn upon in popular culture, even if it has faded within the library itself.

It would certainly be unfair to ascribe that sort of description to the majority of the Llanccarreg staff who, for the most part, are generally cheerful and friendly and clearly dedicated to their jobs – even those who are part-time, short-term or just covering the branch because of the all-too-frequent staff shortages.

For example, Mark – a young, part-time library worker – is always quick to greet users entering the library and engage in conversations about their reading habits (his encyclopaedic knowledge of all forms of literature has impressed me, even if the users themselves seem to take it for granted). If anything, Mark is often too keen to chat with users (or ‘customers’, as he preferred to term them) about their reading choices, and recommend other books they might enjoy, to the point where he almost pounces on people browsing the fiction shelves if they pick up a book he himself has enjoyed previously.

Other staff members are less enthusiastic about greeting users; Molly tends to adopt a ‘speak when spoken to’ philosophy (except to the most regular of regulars), although once she starts talking she is always jolly and pleasant. Some of the less-frequent staff members make less of an effort, although only one (a slightly deaf and somewhat fierce male librarian who predominantly works in a far-flung branch on the other side of the city where he is serving out his last year of service before retirement) could be described as surly (or “downright bloody rude” as Reg put it in an argument with him recently over an overdue book).

There is, therefore, a mixture of ‘greetings and grumpiness’ facing the users of Llanccarreg library when they arrive through the door – but, for the most part, the welcome they receive is a warm one. The power of that to make the average user’s library visit a positive one should not

life at Llanccarreg and is therefore afforded the same status of being ‘data’ which can be interrogated and analysed.

be under-estimated; the polite help of a friendly librarian, particularly to new users, can help to overcome the preconceptions of less-frequent visitors about what the branch is like. This is as true for the older users as for the new ones – Llancarreg’s older residents can remember what the library was like in previous decades, and regularly comment on how much nicer the branch is now, whilst the younger users are often the ones who need more coaxing and persuasion to see the library as a useful and valuable public service.

That final idea of users needing to be ‘coaxed and persuaded’ into using the service is the focus of this section. Making a good impression on users is one which is increasingly essential to the library service as a whole (Melling & Little, 2002; Miao & Bassham, 2007). At Llancarreg, as described above, staff were generally very good at engaging with users and helping them with their requests, and it was largely because of this that the regulars in particular were positive about their experiences with staff:

“Oh, they’re marvellous in here. It doesn’t seem to matter what I want them to get hold of, nothing’s too much trouble. And they’re nice with it, if you know what I mean.” (Evie, retired regular)

“The storytimes are great – they [staff] really know what they’re doing and put the kids at their ease. It’s so much better than the libraries I used to go in when I was a kid.” (Janet, occasional user and mother of four)

In this respect at least, the branch was seen to be user-friendly and welcoming. While that may not at first glance be anything particularly extraordinary, it puts other aspects of the branch into context and underlines the fact that whatever faults the staff may have had (and some of these have been discussed in great detail in Chapter 5 in relation to the bureaucracy of the service), their customer-facing role was one which they generally fulfilled in a gracious and polite manner.

However, when it came to actively promoting the branch and its services, the picture is less clear. Treating existing users in a pleasant manner was key to ensuring the branch’s survival, and was therefore in the interests of staff, not least Clarrie as the branch manager. Finding new users was important to guarantee a prosperous future for the branch, but was less immediately pressing. It was here

that necessity to coax and persuade new users (particularly Llancarreg's younger residents) into using the library came into focus:

Various gimmicks are employed by staff at Llancarreg to widen local public knowledge of the library's facilities (or, in some cases, just its very existence). In recent months, these have ranged from a low level advertising campaign to active promotion of regular branch events and organising new events aimed specifically at the summer holidays, all of which have had a mixed reception and a mixed response.

The advertising campaign began initially with a short-lived experiment of providing carrier bags for users' library books, on the sides of which are slogans about the library service ("Be inspired by your local library", "Your information one-stop shop!"). There was also a large spread in the monthly local authority newspaper (delivered free to every house in the area) about the library service, what facilities it offers and what events it has planned for the summer holidays (for Llancarreg, it listed an activity morning with animals from a nearby zoo and a recycling activity fun day). Finally, a large board (about 6 feet by 3 feet) emblazoned with the slogan "What's on in [local authority]" has now been erected above the fireplace in Llancarreg, with four large A3 panels for posters to be placed advertising local events, and a space at the bottom for flyers.⁶⁴

Some of these attempts to generate enthusiasm about the library service and promote the branch to local residents have had a positive impact. One long-term resident of the area told me early on in the research that he did not even know there was a library in the village – but since the advertising campaign has started, he has been into branch to see it for himself. His ignorance may not be widely shared, but the greater visibility given to the library by the advertising campaign may well have alerted others to the news that there is indeed a library in Llancarreg.

Furthermore, the events which have taken place over the course of the summer, especially the one-off special events during the summer holidays (an activity day organised by a nearby zoo with animals brought into the branch, and a presentation about recycling), have been well-attended and widely seen as successful.

In addition to the one-off events, word-of-mouth reputation of the IT classes amongst residents has led to a renewed interest and more names being added to the waiting list. The weekly storytime sessions have also seen a larger-than-usual attendance because of the summer holidays – not in itself unusual, but in recent weeks Laura (and to a

⁶⁴ Although one of the flyer spaces was eventually used (to advertise an open day at a nearby leisure centre), the poster spaces were never used during the fieldwork.

lesser extent Clarrie) have been ‘upselling’ the classes by telling the mothers coming into the library during the week about them and encouraging them to come. It’s basic word-of-mouth publicity, but it’s one of the few instances where the concept of upselling, so common in the private sector, has been within Llancarreg library.

The branch did make efforts, therefore, to promote itself. That these efforts were sporadic (often centred around school holidays and aimed particularly at children and their parents) is worth noting because it signifies how the library service focused primarily on coaxing unfamiliar users into the library space (the plastic bag advertising was a case in point – aimed at alerting other people in the area to their local library). As was made clear in the previous section, however, there was a marked difference between the attitude towards young users (children coming to storytime with their mothers, for example) and the attitude towards slightly older children (such as those who found the library’s attitude towards technology to be out of touch with their needs). That disparity is significant, demonstrating a paucity of joined-up provision for children and teenagers, with little to retain younger users when they start coming to the branch independently.

However, the ‘upselling’ of the storytime sessions to likely participants also showed that the branch made an effort (albeit a small one) to get existing users to extend their library use into other areas of provision. It also showed the branch using a marketing technique which was under-used elsewhere in the library service. This is potentially a fertile area for libraries to replicate the private sector – many high street book shops have recommendation notes by particular books on their shelves (along the lines of “If you liked Book X by Author A, try Book Y by Author B” and so on). Llancarreg branch library, in common with most other branches, had not tried imitating the practice, but it had achieved a relative degree of success with a smaller-scale scheme whereby Clarrie asked children to write short reviews of books they returned which she then stuck up on one of the noticeboards. Most of the reviews were quite low on detail (“I liked this book”, “The pictures were nice”), although Clarrie had added in a few reviews of her own to bolster what was there, but the point was that it was an attempt to adapt a marketing technique for use in the library.

These efforts to promote the library to new users and to tempt existing users with new services undoubtedly fitted in with policy aims (CyMAL, 2006; DCMS, 1999, 2003). They demonstrate that staff did make attempts to engage more with the local community by moulding their services and promoting them accordingly. However, there were other factors within the branch over which they had less control, and which did as much to repel users as the promotional efforts did to attract them. In the main, these centred around one over-arching problem – the branch was physically set up to be a short-term space for visitors, rather than one in which users could spend any substantial amount of time. For example, users frequently commented on the temperature within the library – the age of the building and its elderly heating system combined to make Llancarreg a particularly cold space. It was not uncommon to see users wearing woolly hats whilst using the computers or reading in the sofa area on colder days. Other users would simply leave as and when the cold became too much for them. The cold had less of an impact on staff, who kept an electric heater on in the back room of the library to which they would escape whenever possible to warm up. For the users, however, visits to the library in the winter months were kept as brief as possible because of the conditions within the branch.

Other factors also limited the time spent by users in the library. The lack of publicly-available toilet facilities, for example, significantly reduced the time it was possible to spend in the building. Again, the ‘backstage area’ used by staff included a toilet, but this was not open to users meaning that anyone wanting to work for an entire morning or afternoon in the branch would have to exert a degree of forward-planning. Staff would occasionally take pity on users – on one or two occasions, Clarrie allowed a child to use the staff toilet rather than be forced to leave before the storytime session had started. This was very much the exception, however, and again showed how circumstances beyond the control of front-line staff impacted on users’ experiences of the library as a modern, user-friendly institution.

Staff were aware of these limitations, and regularly sympathised with users about them, but were unable to do anything more because such decisions lay beyond their authority:

“It’s hard enough for us when it’s freezing like today, so God only knows what it’s like for the older [users]; no wonder they’re all leaving after five minutes – it’s warmer out there than in here! Why [management] don’t sort out the heating, I’ll never know.” (Mark, junior librarian)

“If I had all the money in the world to do it, I’d put toilets in straight away, of course I would. It’s not right in the 21st Century that we’ve not got them. You’d never build a new library from scratch and not have toilets, so why do we let it happen in the old ones? But things like that don’t get decided by us in the branch – it’ll be the ones upstairs who hold the purse strings who’ll decide.” (Clarrie, senior librarian)

The net effect was that users were given the impression that the library made an effort to market itself as a friendly, welcoming, modern service, but that this wasn’t matched by the branch’s facilities:

“[Staff] do their best, but the building’s not up to it. It’s a beautiful building, mind, but it needs to be gutted and started again.” (Evie, retired regular)

“I suppose I normally stay [in the library] for twenty minutes, half an hour. When I have wanted to stay for longer, to read the paper, hide from the rain, whatever, even then I don’t stay for more than three-quarters of an hour. It’s not really set up for it, is it? If you need the loo or want to have something to eat, well you might as well go home!” (Jez, semi-regular user)

Whilst improving the facilities of the building itself may have been beyond the control of staff, the layout and design of the room was another area where the branch was unable to meet the expectations of modern users. The interior of the building had been renovated in the mid-1990s, with little being added or changed since (the two sofas were the most recent additions, bought four years ago to replace some armchairs which had preceded them). The branch has been described in greater detail in Chapter 4, but here it is worth highlighting how the décor of Llancarreg, although adequate for the branch’s needs, remained somewhat drab and uninspiring. The building was clean and in working order, but it was not the sort of environment which stirred much enthusiasm, whether for

reading, learning, leisure or play. It was a plain, slightly shabby space with little to generate much ardour.

This is broadly representative of many branch libraries near Llanccarreg and beyond – but not so much so that it can be considered the complete norm. Indeed, there are many examples of branches of a similar size to Llanccarreg providing facilities for users which are much more eye-catching and comfortable than was the case at Llanccarreg. This is often done in simple ways – bright colour schemes, displaying books cover-outwards (as is the case in many bookshops), using slogans to attract attention, having uncluttered space for browsing and socialising.

Making these sorts of changes is not without its difficulties; modernising a service like the public library where users develop a fondness and attachment to ‘their’ branch is fraught with complexities. References have been made in other chapters to the taking down of paintings in the branch and the removal of second-hand book sales; these represented an effort on behalf of the service to be more ‘professional’ like its private-sector counterparts in the book trade. Significantly, however, these efforts were seen as being a step too far (by some staff as well as users), and a betrayal of what the service should represent. The focus on consumers, it was suggested, had got in the way of the focus on the community and, in doing so, shifted the ethos which underpinned the service in the eyes of those who used it.

The distinction is not just one of semantics. Indeed, I would argue that the terms used within the library are particularly relevant to signifying what values the modern branch is hoping to espouse. One example is the title given to users by staff. As the fieldnotes show, the term ‘customer’ or ‘client’ is increasingly used by staff (in Llanccarreg and beyond) to describe what once would have been referred to as a ‘patron’ or ‘borrower’. This is not, however, inconsequential semantics – the use of such terms is heavily-laden with social meaning, as Lipsky notes: “The processing of people into clients, assigning them to categories for treatment by bureaucrats, and treating them in terms of those categories, is a social process” (Lipsky, 1980: 59, original emphasis)

The public library, as a street-level public service, has not been immune to such changes. For the library, the shift is indicative of a changing service, where terms on which it operates are subtly altering. This is to some extent necessary, recognising that the library needs to make greater efforts to promote itself. On the other hand, the redefining of its patrons into ‘customers’ or ‘clients’ suggests a small, but highly important, change in denoting who controls and influences the service. That change is not unique to libraries, by any means; ‘customer’ is now widely used across a range of industries and fields to define what might previously have been described as commuters, patients, prison inmates, football fans and all sorts of other labels. Yet the label signifies something important about the power struggle taking place: “the word ‘customer’ [is] a term whose politeness disguises its real intent: to subtly shift the perception of ownership” (Parkes, 2008: 18).

The use of the word ‘customer’ within the library sector is not new: over forty years ago, one article on ‘consumer advice in the library’ advised that “borrowers are becoming ‘customers’ for information” (Wainwright, 1966: 538) and offered bleak warnings if the service did not change to take advantage of that. What is new is the significance of the term in denoting moral ownership of the service, and it is here that the rise of technology and consumerism fundamentally challenges the library sector by making new demands on traditional notions of what the library service is and what it is for.⁶⁵

A point was made earlier in the chapter about how the public library has moved from being a “temple of knowledge” to being “the ‘living room in the city’” (Resource, 2003: 4). The crucial difference between those two states is this level of ownership felt by users. In its most positive light, the level of ownership is balanced in such a way that users are stakeholders of ‘their’ branch:

⁶⁵ It would be remiss of me not to explain and justify at this point my own terminology for the patrons / customers / borrowers / users of the library at Llancarreg and beyond. I have consciously and deliberately described the ‘users’ of libraries, principally because I judge the term to be the most value-free and ‘neutral’ of those possible, sitting somewhere in the middle ground between modern, consumerist labels of ‘client’ or ‘customer’ and more traditional notions of a ‘patron’. I do, however, acknowledge that even this term is not without its complications and criticisms.

... staff suggest that the library is almost like a second home to them, and they are extending a similar sense of hospitality to library users as they would to guests. This sense of shared ownership contributes much to its overall feel and character: it creates a sense of ownership balanced between librarian, users and local authority. (Comedia, 1993: 33)

That balance is a very fragile one, and I would argue that subtle factors like the labels used to describe users actually threaten it, because of an underlying division over what the library exists to do.

On the one hand, the service is classifying its users as ‘customers’ and changing the service to make it more family-friendly and more flexible, designing ever-brighter and more welcoming buildings, and making efforts at a local level to show that libraries can be fun. On the other hand, it is distancing itself from its local community⁶⁶ by removing artefacts which make it look ‘unprofessional’, embracing technology but only in ways which alienate younger users and alarm older ones, and promoting IT predominantly as a vehicle for ‘serious pursuits’ without considering how else it might benefit the branch and its users.

The steps which the library service has made towards meeting government ambitions for modernisation (DCMS, 2008b) have arguably come at a cost. The development of a service which presents itself in a more ‘professional’ light to compete with the private sector as a provider of knowledge could be seen to have undermined the place of users as stakeholders in the service; furthermore, it has also further complicated the issue of what the service exists to provide. Finally, even where the service operates with ambitions of providing a modern, consumer-focused service, the facilities and resources at the front-line are sometimes ill-equipped and inadequate to match those aims.

7.3: Conclusions

As with other elements of library life at Llancarreg, the fundamental difficulty the

⁶⁶ As always, I use the term guardedly; in this context, I am referring to the ‘library community’ outlined in Chapter 6 – ie, those regulars for whom the library was more than a public institution and whose attachment to the branch made them ‘stakeholders’.

branch faced when dealing with the challenges of technology and the demands of modern users was deciding exactly what its role was to its users and how best to fulfil it. This chapter has shown how different sets of users wanted different, and sometimes conflicting, things from technology in the branch. Some of those groups had their expectations matched or even exceeded, while others found that the library fell a long way short of providing what they wanted. Underlying these differences, and to a large extent explaining them, was confusion amongst staff and users about the library's 'branding'; what the library meant as an institution, what values it enshrined, and how best to fulfil the demands of its users. Turning the service's 'libraryness' into a brand and marketing it remained a largely unattainable ambition.

For example, by not providing a clear direction for the development of IT services, the library has sown confusing and contradictory messages to its users about what its computing facilities are for. It is plainly an ambiguity that the majority of book stock is provided for leisure (and promoted with that objective in mind through advertising campaigns emphasising the 'fun' element of reading) whilst computer facilities are predominantly treated as being for 'work' of one description or another. Even for the older users who were encouraged to use the IT facilities, the library service at Llancarreg still provided mixed messages. The classes provided to acclimatise the older users to the facilities were taught in ways which did very little to break down the barriers to regular IT use. The scepticism about the safety of the internet on the part of the learners was to be expected – few of them had wide experience of the technology, and their knowledge was drawn largely from scare stories in the media – but it was surprising to see it reflected amongst those teaching the courses. Anderson (2007) has suggested that libraries are ill-equipped to deal with the technology at their fingertips; at Llancarreg, the hurdle was sometimes one of staff attitude as much as technical competence.

This should perhaps not be altogether surprising. Llancarreg library is a conventional, conformist environment – that is part of the reason for its everydayness and its attraction to many users. This was reflected in the library's book stock, its spatial layout and also in its attitude to IT where the approach was

one of caution and wariness – even amongst those (like the IT class pupils) who had made an effort to engage with the technology.

Within such a context, however, it is hard to see how the public library can be “providing a cornerstone [of] an information nation” (MLA, 2007: 20) without the support or enthusiasm amongst library staff and users. The service is fundamentally faced with a gap between its ambitions and its responsibilities to its users: “for all its commitment to emancipation, the modern public library [is] used to supporting ‘acceptable’, ‘recognisable’ socio-political agendas” (Black, 2000: 162) in which “current users often oppose changes in provision designed to attract new users” (Leadbeater, 2002: 12).

On a wider level, this chapter has outlined the complexity of public service reform at the front line, particularly where users have a firm expectation of what a service will provide. Moreover, the challenge of reforming services to make them more like their private-sector counterparts threatens (and is threatened by) perceptions of ownership amongst the service’s users. Unless such reforms have a clear, stated ambition which can elicit public support, they can be difficult to achieve. In the case of the library service, the most recent pronouncements towards “digital services and information literacy... a skilled and responsive workforce... a community-led service” (DCMS, 2008b) sound very welcome, but their interpretation at ground level as an erosion of the service’s underlying values (Hanley, 2008) makes them hard to enact.

Having made these arguments and illustrated them through the use of fieldnotes and ethnographic descriptions, it is now my intention to retreat a little from Llancarreg and its library. In the next chapter, I recast and reconsider the conclusions of the last three chapters in light of wider debates, themes and literatures.

8. All work and no play?: education, leisure and culture in the public library

This chapter recontextualises and consolidates the themes and analyses of the previous chapters. In particular, the chapter reconsiders the competing priorities of the library service, reflecting on how the differing ambitions of educational, cultural and leisure provision are met, and where these sit in relation to debates over the future of the library service. Attention is also paid to how the arguments from the thesis link in to wider discussions around, for example, civic engagement, cultural provision and public service reform.

The substantive, data-led, chapters of the thesis have demonstrated that the library at Llancarreg can be viewed as a setting in which microcosms of much larger arguments around public service delivery were played out on an everyday basis. For example, Chapter 5 demonstrated the difficulty of using quantitative audit practices to measure library use when, for so many users, trips to the branch were about more than just the number of books borrowed. This theme was developed in Chapter 6, which illustrated the social and community importance of the branch and explored how it provided a site for civic engagement and civic expression. Chapter 7 then looked at the challenges faced by the branch from modern technology – where technology fitted into the branch’s ethos, and how the library adapted changing demands in relation to marketing and consumption. The ethnographic data of this thesis has shown some of the practical ways in which these issues are manifested – for example, what abstract policy ambitions around ‘citizenship’ and ‘community’ mean at ground level, or how such ambitions are compromised by other objectives around making the library service more ‘professional’ in its approach.

Running through Chapters 5-7 are several underlying issues which I will seek to synthesise in this chapter. For one thing, there is the central challenge of how to measure public services meaningfully, in ways which gauge both its (quantitative) achievements against performance criteria but also the (qualitative) benefits as experienced by users. There is also the question of whether – and how – everyday instances of civic engagement are recognised within a policy context;

government policy discusses and promotes conceptualisations of ‘citizenship’ (DCMS, 2003; Goldsmith, 2007), but defining and recognising its street-level manifestations is more complex. Issues around the library service’s responsibilities towards education, recreation and culture are also significant, not least in developing a direction for the future of service provision. Finally, there is the issue of reforming the public library service – whether it is necessary, how it should be done and where its focus should lie – central to which is the argument over what are the main tenets of the service. The competing (or, at the very least, occasionally contrasting) priorities of education and leisure have been discussed in previous chapters, with both ideals straddled by understandings and notions of ‘culture’ and precisely how it applies to the output of the library service.

I begin this chapter by outlining the policy context against which the debates over the twin roles of education and recreation within the library service take place. In doing so, I will recast some of the discussions and data from previous chapters to illustrate how both ideals provide some common ground for wider ambitions for the service to provide spaces for ‘belonging’, which in turn fits into wider notions around civic identity and community. In doing so, I hope to emphasise the importance of physical spaces in promoting such ideals. The chapter then revisits the term and concept of ‘culture’ – what it means in a service as diverse in its ambitions as the public library, and how cultural debates are played out on the front line. Again, my aim here is to explore the common ground in which ‘culture’ allows a wider range of ambitions to be consolidated. The final section of the chapter further explores issues around reform of the public library service, and the debates over where its future lies; I hope to re-present some of the key arguments as a prologue to the concluding chapter in which policy recommendations will be made.

8.1: Leisure, learning and engagement

Although the library service’s traditional and ideological aim has been to educate and inform its users, the recreational element of its facilities in more recent times has presented users and staff with a set of challenges about where its priorities lie. The repositioning of the service has arguably moved it further away from being

an educational resource and further into the realms of leisure and recreation. This has been more pronounced in recent years but is by no means a new phenomenon:

...public libraries have, ultimately, always (although often after heated controversy) endorsed reading for entertainment and escape. One of the great strengths of the public library, indeed, has been its historic ability to accommodate both utilitarian and idealist perspectives; to provide for the imagination as well as for those seeking ‘useful’ knowledge. (Black, 2000: 158)

It would be erroneous to suggest that the principles of education and recreation in the library are necessarily always competing ones; but as Black points out, their co-existence has often been uneasy. Furthermore, reconciling that sometimes uneasy relationship between the two has been – and remains – a fundamental challenge to identifying the future direction of the library service as a whole. The difficulties of meeting diverse and conflicting expectations have been cited as a major problem for the service, causing some critics to issue “warnings about the library service spreading itself too thinly” (Davies, 2008: 14) if it cannot resolve the question of where its central priorities lie.

Historically, of course, the principle of the public library as a site of education⁶⁷ is well-established (eg, Goulding, 2006b; Holden & Jones, 2006), providing broadly educational and cultural resources on a truly national and comprehensive basis:

The British public library system... is internationally renowned and has functioned as a genuinely popular and non-commercial public space for all strata of society, ‘a living room for the city’; it owes nothing to the market and everything to the good intentions of local government routinely fulfilling long-established statutory obligations. It is the closest equivalent of the National Health Service in the cultural field. (McGuigan, 1996: 72)

McGuigan’s quote is particularly useful as it crystallises some of the central tenets of the British library service (some of which contribute towards its ‘libraryness’) – there is the rather romantic concept of the library as a public good which

⁶⁷ Whilst I have used the word ‘education’ here, I use the term loosely to describe a much wider set of values around ‘self-improvement’. The terms ‘education’, ‘learning’ and ‘work’ will all be used in this chapter to refer to the common idea of using the library for ‘serious’ (as opposed to recreational) purposes.

straddles social boundaries, but also its appeal as being a place of relaxation (the 'living room for the city'). Moreover, it acknowledges the extent to which the library service is established as a site for informal education and culture, and the role that its wide network of branches has played in achieving that end. In this way, education, cultural improvement and civic engagement as roles of the library service have become firmly intertwined: "The library is seen as being informed with the historical principle of 'the right to know', of civic rights, of the freedom of knowledge; it embodies the idea of human betterment" (Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995: 51).

What is interesting is how these 'historical principles' have been shaped and adapted in recent decades to work alongside the newer role of entertaining the user. Library policy still expresses explicit support for education and learning as a primary role of the library service:

Public libraries provide a learning network that supports formal education but also extends far beyond it. Reading, literacy and learning are inextricably linked. The self-motivated learning which libraries promote is central to the creation of a lifelong learning culture in which people expect and want to learn throughout their lifetime. (DCMS, 2003: 8)

Yet while policy still locates the library as a place for educational and/or cultural provision (DCMS 1999, 2003), the reality on the ground is not as straightforward. Chapter 5 of this thesis discussed changes to library book stock which have resulted in a rise in the provision of fiction and 'light' reading materials (see also Ross, McKechnie & Rothbauer, 2006). Chapter 7 also noted the proliferation of computers and the internet within public libraries, which has altered the service's traditional role by offering resources which are open to a much wider cross-section of uses than is perhaps the case for books alone (Coates, 2004; Leadbeater, 2002). In a policy sense as well, the message about the balance between education and leisure has become more mixed, both at a national level (DCMS, 2008b) and a regional one (eg, CyMAL, 2006).

Government policy (DCMS, 1999, 2003) and some academic works (Coates, 2004; Davies, 2008) have suggested that there is scope for the two ideals of leisure and education to be reconciled without the library service having

necessarily to endorse or reject either approach. Yet it is equally clear from other empirical research (eg, Broady-Preston & Cox, 2000; Lilley, 2000; Usherwood *et al*, 2005) that the two ideals offer substantially different outcomes and users have firm and fixed views about which approach is the more important. Within this research, Chapter 5 demonstrated that book stock at Llancarreg was primarily aimed at users coming to the library to borrow recreational material, yet Chapter 6 also identified a significant number of users at the branch who enjoyed the ‘companionable silence’ provided by a setting espousing notions of self-improvement and cultural engagement. These were by no means isolated examples of a divide amongst users over what the branch’s priority should be.

What is particularly striking about policy direction in this regard is that the importance of leisure and recreation is linked to plans for service reform in which the public library will draw on elements of private sector provision. Hence, there are references to making public libraries “easy and pleasant to use – in particular looking at what attracts people to bookshops” (DCMS, 2003: 20). Similar sentiments have also been expressed in recent reviews of the service (DCMS, 2008b). As Chapter 7 touched upon, looking towards bookshops and the private sector as a model for the library service to emulate is not necessarily straightforward. Part of the library’s ‘libraryness’ – and the thing which makes it a well-used and popular service amongst many people – is that it offers a space which uniquely combines both sociability and independence. Again, Chapter 6 explored this by identifying the ways in which the branch at Llancarreg offered space for communal activities but also ‘companionable silence’, and how these twin ambitions can at times be competing ones.

The desire for recreational space, and the readiness of the service to provide it, reflects the emergence of the library as a social arena. The social aspect of the branch at Llancarreg and the opportunity for community engagement accounted significantly for library’s attractiveness as a service. This was demonstrated by examples in earlier chapters – for example, the ways in which IT classes and storytime sessions were constructed to allow and promote social interaction, or the welcome given to Reg’s gang of regulars for whom the regular social meet-ups were a key element of what the library provided. These

incidences are important in building up a picture of a service which was by no means restricted to the lending of books and the provision of IT as its sole purposes. In actual fact, providing a home for interactions and fostering a spirit of social exchange is pivotal to policy expectations for “[l]ibraries [to be] public anchors for neighbourhoods and communities... safe, welcoming neutral spaces open to all” (DCMS, 2003: 9), as a key part of the service’s commitment to social inclusion (CyMAL, 2008a; DCMS, 1999). What might have appeared at first glance as relatively trivial or incongruous bouts of gossip and chatter actually potentially has a significance in making the branch a hub for social and civic exchange. At one time, this socialising and interaction might have been at odds with the service’s ethos, during the ‘Silence Please’ era of the library. Now, however, this role has become not just accepted and welcomed amongst users and staff, but also amongst policy-makers (CyMAL, 2008a, 2008b; DCMS, 1999, 2003, 2008b).

Recreational use of a library – as witnessed in this study – is now a normal, (mostly) accepted and (mostly) welcomed part of the service’s ethos. Moreover, the evidence suggests that this emphasis is no longer constrained just to policy documents. It is now, at least partly, a formal part of systematic, strategic, ground-level practices to promote the leisure paradigm by ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980). Within Llancarreg, this was manifested in several ways. There was the deliberate insertion into the IT classes of exercises and tasks for learners to undertake whilst the tutor had a break, constructed to give pupils the chance to chat amongst themselves and to make the classes more fun. The decision to start storytime sessions a little late every week so the mothers (and children) could socialise was also an indication that social exchanges were considered as important as any educational element to the activity. Meanwhile, the organisation of books in the branch so that they were classified by genre rather than by any formal classification system also demonstrated a desire to make the library a more informal setting.

This final example is a particularly good example of the public library service understanding the importance of providing its services in ways which appeal to recreational users. Unlike an academic library or even some sections of

a central public library, the book stock in most branches are organised along (sometimes quite subjective) thematic lines. At Llancarreg, it was felt by staff that this made the books more accessible to users walking in off the street by making the system more immediately user-friendly and allowing readers to head towards their topic of interest without needing to refer to any sort of directory or ask for assistance.

The key thing to note is that the branch library is predominantly designed, often deliberately, to promote leisure and recreational use of its facilities. In doing so, it does more than just lend copies of light fiction and allow users to chat informally to one another. As Chapters 5 and 6 explored, it also gives the library service a purpose (which may or may not be recognised by staff and management) by fostering a sense of ‘belonging’ amongst users. The relaxed and informal nature of the branch library is part of its everyday appeal and its ‘libraryness’. It is what gives users a space onto which they can project their own set of principles, and which they can shape into something over which they have a sense of ownership. At Llancarreg, there were good examples of this, but also instances of it being undermined by other practices and priorities. For example, Reg and his gang being able to use the library as a place to leave a petition on a contentious local issue satisfied policy expectations for libraries to “develop their role as community resource centres, providing access to communication as well as information” (DCMS, 1999: 16). On the other hand, when staff were forced to remove the paintings displayed in the branch by the local artists’ club, this could be seen as ignoring that same set of principles and objectives.

Nevertheless, there was sense of ownership and belonging amongst the branch’s users (and its regulars in particular) which succeeded in making the branch “regarded as a community facility, rather than simply a council service” (DCMS, 1999: 16). What is remarkable – as Chapter 6 explained – was that this happened in ways beyond obvious spoken interaction. The ‘companionable silence’ is a key part of the library service’s appeal (Black, 2000; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; Hanley, 2008), and is underpinned by its own set of values and ideals

about what the library is for. Thus, the informal learners⁶⁸ of the branch contributed just as much to its social atmosphere and a collective sense of social integration as those who were engaged in more obvious and observable social activities.

If ‘community’ is to usefully denote anything, then this seems to be it. Conceptualisations of community can invoke ideas of interaction and sociability, but they can equally be based on more intangible notions of a broad sense of a togetherness and communality which relies very little on spoken communication. Notions of community depend on an idea of commonality for a particular group of individuals (Cohen, 1985) – a shared interest, a shared background or some other defining criteria of what it is to be similar – which marks them out as being separate.⁶⁹ As Raymond Williams has noted in specific relation to libraries: “For many people the sense of a community, the meaning of what it is to be living together in a particular place, is organised around some prominent mark or place” (Williams, 1978: 72).

It is for precisely this reason that the idea of ‘community facilities’ exists at all – a sports centre or a park is physical space in which anyone can meet and take part in group activities, and where communities may be formed and developed within that space. Other, ‘closed’ facilities offer the same opportunity to those who are already members of a particular community – churches or social clubs, for example – where the physical space is created because of a demand amongst a pre-existing community.

⁶⁸ I use the expression here to refer to those individuals who identified themselves as such – those using the branch to borrow material which they considered to be ‘improving’ in one way or another. I will save the debates over the cultural merits of library stock for the next section of the chapter.

⁶⁹ It is worth noting also, however, that this angle has been less strongly highlighted within government policy precisely because it emphasises divergence as well as convergence. Instead, policy which mentions community has given emphasis to a more conservative idea of a community being a geographical entity; little more, in fact, than the residents of a particular area, even if their interests, background and characteristics could be disparate. Hence, the Department of Culture, Media & Sport talk of libraries as being “based in the community... [and] regarded as a community facility” (DCMS, 1999: 16). It is hard to envisage how a library (or any other facility) could not be ‘based in a community’ in this geographical sense, and it further clouds the issue of what the word actually means in real terms.

It is this sense of community which is perhaps most pertinent to this study – a community based around a particular space which defines and becomes home to a given set (or sets) of users who feel that they share traits which are espoused by that space. For that community, there is a heavy reliance on the physical space which homes it; outside of that space, the community members revert to being individuals who may still meet and interact, but not under the same banner or necessarily in the same way(s) as they would within their ‘home’ space. It is for this reason that understanding the space and the characteristics which it exhibits becomes so important – it is these features which attract the community and which inform and guide their use.

In a strict sense, the library at Llancarreg was providing library facilities to all the residents in its geographical area, but in actual fact its core band of patrons was a much smaller group, who felt the library to be particularly relevant to them. Within that, the smaller groups of regulars felt able to use the library as a place for community expression of some sort. Far from directing its facilities towards the large-scale geographical community as suggested in policy literature (DCMS, 1999, 2001), the core community of the library could actually be identified as consisting of little more than a group of fifty or sixty regulars. That presented a difficulty for staff in directing their services – the library ran a constant risk of either being inward-looking and exclusive (by catering just for its core community) or outward-looking and ignoring its ‘base’ (by concentrating too heavily on bringing in new users).

Moreover, in terms of the branch’s general provision of services, that core group of fifty to sixty regulars was by no means a representative demographic. Although the group was relatively well-balanced in gender terms, for the most part the core regulars of the branch were elderly (in most cases either retired or approaching retirement age), white and middle-class. This did reflect some of the demographic trends in Llancarreg (see Chapter 4), but it could by no means be seen as a representative sample of the local population. The branch’s inclusion agenda, in this respect, could be said to be inadequate. Libraries have historically been “the special refuge of the misfits and left-overs, of the hollow-cheeked, watery-eyed, shabby and furtively sad” (Hoggart, 1957: 70); the modern paradigm

points to a range of institutional barriers which “restrict usage by certain... sections of the community” (DCMS, 1999: 12), including things such as “inappropriate rules and regulations” and a “lack of a sense of ownership and involvement by the community” (DCMS, 1999: 12). Yet by referring to ‘the community’ as a single, holistic geographical construct, the policy fails to allow for many different types of community who may have conflicting, or at least differing, needs. Thus, ‘inappropriate rules and regulations’ for one group may well be entirely appropriate for another, whilst a ‘sense of ownership’ may not be possible for all sets of users.

As the data in Chapter 6 demonstrated, this is in fact what sometimes happened at ground level in Llanccarreg. The rules of social engagement for the vocal sets of users in Reg’s gang differ from the hushed, companionable silence of other groups of users; the chattering mothers at the storytime sessions, meanwhile, may feel little affiliation with the library facility beyond the narrow sessions which they attend. These rules and regulations also played their part in dictating which Llanccarreg residents did not come to the library at all and contributed towards its narrow demographic of regulars. For example, Chapter 7 identified the teenagers of the area who used the nearby internet café instead of the library because of restrictive software on the branch’s computers which limited their use of the facilities.

A similar scenario is played out in terms of how the branch provided a sense of ownership for users. Again, this policy ambition is reinterpreted on the front line according to circumstance. The public still treat the library as ‘their’ space even if some of the things which mark it out as ‘theirs’ (the pictures on the wall, for example) are removed. The groups of regulars within the branch claim the space as their own, and their routines within it become *de facto* routines of the library. Even when the physical space around them changes, their place within it is unchallenged. This demonstrates not only the robustness of the communities themselves, but also the role of the physical space in giving expression to their own sense of communality.

One question which does arise out of this, and which was alluded to in Chapter 5, is whether these regular users exert too much influence over the branch and whether that ownership is detrimental to the inclusion of other groups. The Llancarreg regulars who used the library most regularly undoubtedly wielded some influence over the way in which the branch was run – they were able to manipulate the times at which some organised events started or finished to fit with their timetables, they could also persuade staff to allow them access to certain facilities which might be denied to others, or to overlook library fines which might otherwise have been applied. As was made clear in Chapter 5, these are not new debates for public services – Lipsky (1980) has written of the ways in which street-level bureaucrats and street-level bureaucracies can privilege certain individuals over others. Yet criticisms of this are arguably misplaced, because the situation belies an inherent contradiction. What can be seen as the privileging and prioritisation of certain users can also be seen as ‘involving key stakeholders’ (CyMAL, 2006; DCMS, 1999) and running a branch which is responsive to the needs of its regulars.

The key point is whether those users who benefited disproportionately from the service did so at the expense of the remaining users. If a library is to mean anything as a space for social interaction and civic engagement, by necessity it must play host to a wide variety of users and afford benefits to each (this, in part, is the basis of the service’s inclusion agenda – DCMS, 1999). Citizenship is in part experienced through the sharing of the public realm and the differing demands, expectations and ideas which different sets of people bring to it (Cooper, 1998). The consensus of a given branch is, in a small way, an expression of citizenship because it articulates a particular set of values espoused by the communities in that space. In this way, “libraries support democracy... by creating ‘community spaces’ in which community members can learn, imagine and discover” (Byrne, 2004: 15).

The physical nature of libraries in providing that opportunity is crucial. At a time when there is an increasing emphasis on notions of e-citizenship and the democratising advantages of the internet (Dahlgren, 2000; Scammell, 2000), the importance of tangible spaces in which citizenship can happen has sometimes

gone unnoticed, but it remains fundamentally important: “In spite of (and perhaps because of) the jet, the ‘net, and the fast-food outlet, place persists as a constituent element of social life and historical change” (Gieryn, 2000: 463). Whereas physical places are “filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations” (*ibid.*: 465), the same is not tangibly true for their digital equivalent.⁷⁰ In contrast, a branch library like Llancarreg provides a physical public space in which communities can meet, either as part of a formal group or on a more casual basis in a space which is theirs, and in which they have some sense of ownership. One of the claims which it seems reasonable to make on the basis of this research and the evidence of the previous chapters is that the physical space of the public library at Llancarreg allowed particular policy priorities (around community, around citizenship, around culture) to be played out in ways which may have been impossible (or at least unlikely) elsewhere in the same locality. The everyday nature of a space like a library, in part, allows people to project onto it the values and ideals which are important to them, such that the spaces becomes “the environment of the group and of the individual within the group; it is the horizon at the centre of which they place themselves” (Lefebvre, 2008b: 231). In this case, the library itself became a location for civic expression, allowing library users to “experience their identity as citizens rather than as consumers” (Worpole, 1992: 118) – even if, as the previous chapter considered, they may still have been described in such terms.

While the traditional role of the public library (of informing and illuminating the public) is perhaps difficult to reconcile with the materialism of consumer culture, the two ideals can in fact be complementary. Chapter 6 outlined the common association between the public library and civic expression; by the same token, “[c]onsumption has been one of the most recurring means by which citizens have moulded their political consciousness” (Hilton, 2003: 1). The link between consumerism – what is consumed, how and by whom – and ambitions

⁷⁰ Whilst I acknowledge the range of work on online ethnographies (eg, Dicks, Mason, Coffey & Atkinson, 2005; Hine, 2000; Mann & Steward, 2000; Puri, 2007), I do not feel it contradicts the argument being made here about the tangibility of public spaces. Many library users (certainly those at Llancarreg) may not be members of an online community which offers them the same social benefits as a public space. Moreover, the physical presence of the library as an object of civic expression is something which cannot easily be replicated by something virtual and more ethereal.

towards civic engagement is not, therefore, an arbitrary one. To make sense of consumerist values at any one time is also to tap into the dominant civic and political consensus – a point not lost on those who have made the link between consumerism and the third way neo-liberalism of recent Labour governments (see, for example, Johnson & Steinberg, 2004; Giddens, 2000; Hilton, 2003). This point was explored, somewhat tangentially, in Chapter 7 in relation to the labels used to describe users of the library service – the decision to refer to what once might have been ‘patrons’ as ‘customers’ denotes something about how the library service has moved to reflect changes in society. In this respect, consumerism is not just the simple act of consumption itself, but is the much wider process which informs and shapes consumption as a way of life (Miles, 1998).

For the library service, this presents several challenges which cut to the core of its ethos. At the most obvious level, “television and DVDs have pretty much replaced book culture as the main vehicle of entertainment... [and] the internet... [has become] a universally accessible source of information on all topics” (Poulter, 2007: 461). Meanwhile, official library policy documents now note the presence of “Google culture” and “competitive service from bookshops” as threats to the public library’s traditional services (CyMAL, 2006: 11). The library service therefore finds itself in a unique position. On the one hand, it is a service based on increasingly rare ideals – those of trust (that a patron will borrow an item and return it on-time and in good condition) and free access (users borrowing items usually without any charge at all). Indeed, it is partly because of these ideals that the library is still frequently viewed as being quaintly anachronistic, and it is interesting to question whether the service would operate on the same model if it was created from scratch within a 21st Century culture. Yet on the other hand, the library service has had to at times move away from these ideals and adapt to change. The library ‘brand’, such as it is, has certain values at its core which are seen to be sacred to its users, but these same values make government ambitions for modernisation of the service harder to manage for those on the front-line.

I have covered a lot of ground in this section, discussing educational and recreational use of the branch, and how both are intrinsically linked to wider notions of ‘belonging’ which, in turn, links to conceptualisations of the library as a space for citizenship and community. Critically, as previous chapters have explored, the branch library is home to a wide variety of users with an equally wide range of interests and expectations. What is apparent from the data and my analysis, however, is that not only do large numbers of users get what they want from the service, but they also contribute (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not) to the wider ethos of the branch; its ‘libraryness’ or culture. Indeed, it is that final notion of ‘culture’ which is the starting point for the following section, which will unpack further the debates over cultural provision for the public library – what it means, how it is experienced by users, and where its role lies in the future development of the service.

8.2: Culture is ordinary?

Having recast some elements of the education / leisure dualism in relation to the social agenda(s) of the library service, I now want to explore the same notions a little further in a slightly different direction. The twin ambitions of the library service, to education and to entertain, can easily be cast as oppositional and irreconcilable aims, yet the two ideas need not always be mutually exclusive. Indeed, rather than being oppositional poles, they exist more as a continuum along which the wide range of library services are located. What I want to do in this section is to investigate a little further the middle ground of that continuum, particularly notions of ‘culture’ which have been mentioned throughout the previous chapters and consider what, in practical terms, such a definition means in the context of libraries and libraryness.

To start out with a straightforward example, Chapter 5 discussed the ways in which the library service’s audit practices (at Llancarreg at least) created and sustained a situation whereby light fiction was promoted within the branch because it was the most popular form of literature and therefore the one which generated the most beneficial statistics for the branch. Yet these arguments – which are as much about culture as they are about audit techniques – can be

viewed in a more favourable light. In Chapter 5, the provision of populist light fiction was portrayed as proof of the service's desire to meet its audit requirements ahead of its cultural ambitions. Having taken a step back from the library, this can maybe be recast a little more sympathetically. For one thing, the same managers who design and perpetuate the audit system may well be aware of the shortcomings of that system:

When confronted with the dilemma of serving more clients or maintaining high quality service, most public managers will experience great pressures to choose in favour of greater numbers at the expense of quality. Their inability to measure and demonstrate the value of a service, when combined with high demand and budgetary concerns, will tend to impose a logic of increasing the quantity of services at the expense of the degree of attention workers can give to individual clients. (Lipsky, 1980: 99-100)

It is easy to criticise the library service and its audit practices for systematically privileging light fiction and other materials which generated the most lending figures. To do so, however, ignores several important factors. Firstly, as has already been explained in Chapter 5 and elsewhere, front-line staff understood, accepted and sometimes resisted the practices because they recognised that they were unreflective of the wider benefits the library brought. Secondly, the promotion of populist material was not wholly without its cultural merits. It is even questionable as to whether the systems came at the expense of providing a broad range of material; at Llancarreg, as with most small branches, it was only possible to display and stock a limited range of material because of space constraints, but this did not prevent users from being able to access and order resources from the larger Central library if they needed them. Indeed, staff were quick to promote this service, and were generally enthusiastic in helping users to access obscure material. Users' access to 'culture', therefore, was still theoretically very good, even if the materials on display in their local branch inclined towards populism.

At a policy level, the Government link libraries and culture together in a descriptive sense, by including "libraries, literature, writing and publishing" in their definition of culture (DCMS, 2008a: 5). In the policy context for Wales, the link is seen in a more nationalistic sense, with libraries being seen to "[c]ontribute

to the quality of life of the nation by providing access to its culture and heritage” (CyMAL, 2006: 9). Whether libraries are culture, or whether they provide a home for culture is a matter of interpretation, and these discrepancies are nothing new. The culture on offer at Llancarreg, for example, can realistically be loosely located within any of Williams’ three classifications of culture:

There is the lived culture of a particular time and place... There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts... There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition. (Williams, 1980: 66)

The differing degrees of culture at Llancarreg can perhaps most accurately be said to occupy the ground between ‘culture of selective tradition’ and a ‘recorded culture’ encompassing a much wider range of materials and a much broader set of ideals. Yet even here the distinction is a somewhat unsatisfactory and arbitrary one. The role of the library, if anything, is to navigate between these differing interpretations and to make its cultural output (in whatever form) as accessible to as many people as possible. It was this difficult path which led, arguably, to awkward juxtapositions such as novels by Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë being classified as ‘Aga Sagas’ – on one level, the library was providing material which could be considered as ‘high culture’, but its location alongside mainstream fiction could (and did) invite charges of cultural relativism. By the same token, the fact that the library held over 300 copies of Mills & Boon romances was criticised by some users for being a frivolous use of library resources – a criticism which has been made in more general terms of the library service as a whole (Black & Crann, 2002; Black & Muddiman, 1997; McMenemy, 2007; Toyne & Usherwood, 2001). To reiterate a quote drawn upon in Chapter 5:

The continuing emphasis on raising the levels of book issue leads to a culture where libraries become identikits of each other, with shelves full of populist material, with little room for diversity, and more importantly the non-fiction and reference areas being squeezed to accommodate more paperback novels... Public libraries need to represent the totality of human experience as much as is practicable; it seems to me that you do not do this by focussing on the most populist material at the expense of breadth. (McMenemy, 2007: 275)

I re-use this quote here deliberately, because I think it contributes to the discussion of how culture is interpreted by the library service as well as simply to

debates around audit practices. In particular, the criticism that the library service has over-concentrated on popular culture at the expense of non-fiction and reference material is one which has a resonance, but which is also complicated by the ways in which users approach the library as a service. The previous chapters underlined how cultural consumption within the public library should primarily be viewed as a personal experience – what Willis refers to as people’s desire to “humanise, decorate and invest with meanings their common life spaces and social practices” (Willis, 1990: 2). As such, there is no overt attempt by staff or the library service generally to promote one variety of cultural provision over another; indeed, it seems highly unlikely that staff or users would have had a fixed, shared vision of what ‘culture’ entailed anyway. In more general terms:

A focus on everyday life shows that it is pointless to characterise either ‘high culture’ as wholly above ‘ordinary’ concerns, or ‘popular culture’ as involving totally mindless consumption or ‘low culture’ as involving the wholly praiseworthy activities of downtrodden but plucky Robin Hoods. All simplistic depictions of these areas are revealed, through looking at their mundane operations, to be caricatures. (Inglis, 2005: 108/9)

The ‘mundane operations’ of the library at Llancarreg certainly supported this view; in the previous chapters I pointed towards a much more mixed picture, with a much more blurred set of distinctions. What was apparent at Llancarreg was that – in the field of culture at its widest interpretation – the library made an effective and valued provision. Whatever the criticisms of its book stock, it sourced material which was in demand and popular, and which had a value and benefit to its users. This may not have been educational in the sense used for much of this chapter, but it did correlate to ideals around informal learning as defined by policy makers (“self-motivated learning, in which people can pursue their hobbies and interests” – DCMS, 2003: 29). Moreover, the users themselves absorbed that wide range of culture at a level which suited them, and did not (for the most part) make any arbitrary distinctions over which elements of their library use were educational, cultural or recreational. In Williams’ words, “culture is ordinary” (1958), and its ordinariness accounted for its attractiveness to the users of Llancarreg.

Within policy paradigms, ‘culture’ in one form or another is seen as bridging the gap between leisure and education. Where learning is cited as part of the library’s role, the language used to describe it is significant:

Learning has to become a habit and a culture, rather than an obligation and imposition... Libraries provide an unthreatening environment for self-motivated learning, in which people can pursue their hobbies and interests without necessarily engaging in formal courses. Libraries promote learning as exploration and self-development. (DCMS, 2003: 29)

Note the terms which are used to describe and frame conceptualisations of learning: ‘habit’, ‘hobbies and interests’, ‘exploration and self-development’. Most significantly, ‘culture’ is used in the same breath; the document goes on to refer to this as a “learning culture” (DCMS, 2003: 29). Where learning in its formal sense is seen to be threatened by fears of it being ‘an obligation’ and an ‘imposition’, the ‘learning culture’ of libraries is seen to be ‘unthreatening’ in comparison. This conceptualisation seemingly makes ‘informal learning’ and ‘culture’ interchangeable, with both being cited as learner-led and focused on hobbies and interests rather than formal qualifications. It is this idea of permanent, lifelong informal education as the public library’s primary *raison d’être* which has caused some to argue for libraries to be put “culturally at the centre... of our cities” (Williams, 1978: 76) to foster a spirit of autodidactic self-improvement.

In practical terms, what ‘culture’ does is allow the library service to pitch many of its services towards a middle ground between educational provision and recreational provision. In doing so, it then allows the users themselves to dictate the level of cultural value attached to the particular activity or facility. This wide and all-encompassing notion of cultural provision thus manages to satisfy policy directives by making ‘culture’ a part of the library’s output, but also provide it in ways which are utilised and valued by users. In Llancarreg’s case, this meant that otherwise ‘educational’ resources such as the IT classes or storytime sessions were promoted in ways which also emphasised their recreational appeal. This can be viewed as ‘edutainment’ (eg, Buckingham & Scanlon, 2003, 2005; Okan, 2003) as much as it can be portrayed as ‘culture’, but the effect is the same – on the continuum between education and leisure, culture occupied most of the middle

ground for the front-line library, providing an outlet for the majority of activities which could not have comfortably sat within either extreme. 'Culture', therefore, was an everyday and prosaic notion in many ways, being interpreted by users on a personal level to rationalise their library use into something meaningful to them.

8.3: Conclusions

The British library service is at a crossroads in its development. This has led some to execute dire warnings that "if we do not address the fundamental structural problems of the library service, there may be no libraries to provide these excellent services to readers in ten or fifteen years' time" (Coates, 2004). This has been supported by other calls for reform of the service in one aspect or another (Comedia, 1993; Leadbeater, 2002; Resource, 2003; Roberts, 2006) and reflected by UK government acceptance of the need to review the service (DCMS, 2008b). This thesis provides some balance to this, and gives some practical instances of where the public library at its grass-roots level provides services which are valuable to those who use them and which at least partially fulfil a wide range of policy ambitions towards engagement, inclusion and cultural provision.

That is not to say, however, that there are not some elements of the service which are in need of reform. From a sociological perspective, the space of a public library is clearly one imbued with a wide variety of social meanings and significances for those who inhabit and use it. Not all of these projected social meanings are similar, and some struggle to coexist. Moreover, the social uses of the space (in whatever form) are also what account for the service's popularity and what gives it the ability to fulfil a wide range of policy ambitions around issues such as community engagement, citizenship, informal education and cultural provision. Yet that social importance is seldom legislated for in any detailed way, as Chapter 5 and earlier sections of this chapter have explained.

Reform of the library service perhaps also needs to address wider debates around public service provision. For example, as this chapter has highlighted, there are conflicting demands from both policy-makers and policy users about how best to deliver services, and the inherent inconsistencies of providing

services which are both bureaucratically efficient and also sensitive to the needs and requirements of large numbers of users:

To deliver street-level policy is to embrace a contradiction. On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring, and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints (Lipsky, 1980: 71)

The contradiction as Lipsky presented it is not simply between what users want and what the bureaucracy wants to provide. There is also a contradiction within what users and policy-makers deem as important service priorities. To blame the shortcomings of a given service solely on the bureaucratic procedures does not reflect the whole story – very often, confused and conflicting demands (from users and policy-makers alike) will result in a service which is also confused and conflicting. Lipsky himself acknowledged as much: “society seeks not only impartiality from its public agencies but also compassion for special circumstances and flexibility in dealing with them” (1980: 15).

Thus, users and policy-makers demand public services which operate fairly and equally, with no favouritism of individual clients – but at the same time, they want services to be ‘human’ and responsive to individual needs. Those twin ambitions can require different approaches. In relation to this research, this could be seen in the ways that particular groups of regulars are privileged within a branch library – this can be seen on one level as ‘involving key stakeholders’ or ‘preferential treatment’ on another. Any future reform of the library service may well have to grapple with these issues if it is to have a clear vision of what type of service it wishes to promote. From the audit practices of public services to the role of ‘community facilities’ as spaces to promote civic expression to the changing expectations of users and the changing role of services in the modern world, this thesis has given some insights into how these topics are manifested in the everyday space of the library.

The next chapter provides a conclusion to the thesis as a whole, summarising the findings and central contributions of the research, as well as offering suggestions for further study.

9. Conclusions

The introduction to this thesis identified the social importance of the public library as a site for civic and social engagement, and also argued the case for exploring this familiar social setting as a means by which to gain a greater understanding of everyday life. Focusing on the social and cultural elements of library provision, the thesis has highlighted the complex web of policy priorities and everyday realities of the service and given a close, grounded account of how these issues are played out at the front-line of service provision.

This final chapter seeks to summarise and consolidate the main conclusions from the analysis of the previous chapters and discuss some of the policy implications of those findings. I will also reflect on the research process itself and the course(s) of analysis which I followed, as well as suggesting some particular areas where further research may be warranted. The closing section will make some final observations on current policy debates. I will begin by saying a few short words about the process of leaving the research field.

9.1: Leaving the field

This research had relatively few ethical dilemmas which rendered it especially awkward. There were, for example, no language barriers (Freeman, 1979) or cultural inconsistencies (Abu-Lughod, 1986); neither were there any ethical complexities around interviewing young children (Renold, 2000). Indeed, many of the anticipated difficulties which have already been referred to in passing (such as conducting interviews with Reg's gang, many of whom were much older than me) ultimately turned out to be relatively unproblematic. Nevertheless, the process of leaving the field at the end of this research proved to be hard, primarily because the process of fieldwork had become such an enjoyable one.

Coffey (1999) has written of the relationships which are formed in the field, and during the fieldwork process I developed friendships with some of the participants – particularly Clarrie and Reg. Whilst I am confident that these

friendships did not interfere with the quality of the data or my analysis of it, I do acknowledge that they made the process of exiting the field harder.

In the event, when I became close to satisfied that I had sufficient data to leave the field, and when I felt that some distance from the research site would be beneficial to the analytic process (Watson, 1999), I began to tell the regulars that my research was coming to an end. Although there can sometimes be a winding-down process to ending data collection in the field (Burgess, 1984; Gobo, 2008), my experience was rather different; for most of the research period, I had kept a regular routine of visiting Llancarreg, so the regularity of my visits remained the same even as the research period was drawing to a close. Nevertheless, I was keen that the end of the data collection was a process rather than an event, so I did my best to give the regulars plenty of notice about my plans, and to start saying a few goodbyes to people where appropriate. In my final week, I said goodbyes to the users with whom I had become acquainted. Some asked whether they would be able to see a copy of the final thesis, and I said I would give a copy of it to Clarrie and she could decide whether to put it somewhere in the library or lend it informally to any regulars who might have been interested to see it. On the final day, there was no fanfare to announce my departure – just a few words of thanks to Mark (who was on duty) and a few handshakes with Reg and the gang in the morning. It was cordial and understated, and in that respect felt an entirely appropriate and fitting way to say goodbye to Llancarreg.

Since then, I have stayed in e-mail contact with Clarrie (who has been happy to answer one or two questions about the mechanics of library policy in the local authority when I have needed information), and I have also seen Reg on a few occasions at football matches. Ultimately, the length of time spent in the field, and my enjoyment in collecting data, made the process of leaving the field difficult – but I would not have had it any other way, as I feel the fieldnotes generated were thorough and convey a detailed understanding of social life at Llancarreg.

9.2: Reconnecting to the research aims

I wish to start by reiterating the central findings in relation to the four research aims outlined in Chapter 1 and considering how the issues identified within them have been addressed by the previous chapters:

- 1) To explore how the cultural and social aspirations and outcomes of a library are articulated and assessed; to consider how a local branch library makes sense of and interprets the social and cultural associations of ‘libraryness’

The research sought to elaborate on the concept of “libraryness” identified by Greenhalgh *et al* (1995: 51) as an important, albeit loose, collection of values and ideals which underpin the library service and account in part for its mass appeal. I acknowledge that expanding on the meaning of such a fundamentally and intrinsically elusive concept is not only fraught with difficulty, but is also rather counter-productive – defining what is meant by something so ethereal rather sanitises and trivialises it. Nevertheless, the term has recurred frequently throughout the previous chapters to denote elements of the service which are particularly valued by users and by staff, and which are often unquantifiable constituent parts of the service’s output. Amongst those elements identified in the previous chapters were such things as:

- The library as a source of ‘public good’, promoting both self-improvement and civic engagement
- The library as a site for informal education and culture, organised on a local basis to allow for regional distinctiveness and identity
- The library as a space which uniquely combines both sociability and independence, according to individual preference
- The library as an informal space onto which users can project their own set of principles
- The library as a space of calmness and harmony

Many of these ideals do, of course, chime with the elements identified in Greenhalgh *et al*'s original definition; they cited the importance of the library as a "quiet haven... [which is] democratic, non-partisan... 'value-free'... where the latest reference books and novels keep the local community in touch with the wider world" (1995: 51/2). What I hope I have been able to do in the previous chapters, and where I hope this research has made a contribution to existing literature, is to expand on precisely how these ideals are manifested. Thus, libraryness at Llancarreg was displayed by Reg's gang having an informal gathering in the branch to catch up on the week's gossip and exchange views about local affairs; it was displayed by a number of computer users quietly beaver away at their workstations and enjoying the 'companionable silence' of the setting; it was displayed by it was displayed by the local artists' club being able to display pictures on the wall of 'their' branch (and undermined when those pictures were removed). These things, and all the other examples raised during the previous chapters, are direct examples of 'libraryness in action', and the descriptions and discussions of such incidents form part of this research's contribution towards explaining the definition and applicability of the term.

The rather utopian ideals of the library service may well differ from these front-line realities, but there are nevertheless elements of 'libraryness' which do appear on a daily basis and make the library space one which remains popular with a sizeable number of people. In so many cases, activities in the library at Llancarreg were nothing which could not have been replicated elsewhere – but almost invariably, 'libraryness' proved to be relevant in one way or another in explaining why that particular location mattered to the group(s) in question. There was no obvious reason, for example, why Reg's gang had to meet in the library rather than in the pub, the Post Office or the church hall; nor was there a necessity for the book group to use the branch when so many other similar groups might meet in someone's front room; even the storytime mothers could have read to their children at home rather than come to the local library. Yet in all these cases and more, the answer – to a greater or lesser extent – was that libraryness made the branch the most attractive location at which to take part in a given activity. The informal nature of the setting made it ideal for spoken interactions for the young mothers; the 'public good' and cultural esteem of the building made the

book group feel that their discussions were somehow more meaningful for taking place there; and, for Reg's gang, the library represented somewhere semi-official in which they could discuss issues of the day with a purpose whilst still feeling comfortable and at home.

These qualities link into the other component of the first research aim around how the service's cultural and social aspirations are articulated and assessed. As previous chapters have discussed, many elements of 'libraryness' are unquantifiable and cannot be easily measured by the library's audit practices. That is not to say that the audit practices outlined in Chapter 5 were not important in their own way and did not serve a purpose. Demonstrably, they assessed factors which had a meaning within the bureaucratic systems of the service – the number of books issued, the number of activities taking place, the number of users taking part in an activity. Critically, however, these observations were frequently limited just to counting those numbers rather than to evaluating any of the more abstract elements of the library service which constituted its libraryness. As Chapter 5 also explored, the service's bureaucracy had a limiting impact on front-line staff's autonomy to adapt services to local needs. While this is not uncommon within public services (as frequent references to Lipsky, 1980, have made clear), it does sit uneasily with policy aims for the library service to be flexible to local circumstance (CyMAL, 2008a; DCMS, 1999, 2003, 2008b).

The principal implication emerging from these issues is that the data of the previous chapters (particularly Chapter 5) casts some doubt on whether the measures used to assess library performance are an adequate or accurate reflection of what really happens in a public library. While they accurately measure some elements of library life, they by no means gauge all of them, particularly the social and civic elements of the library which makes it such a valued public service.

- 2) To engage critically with the relationship between local library services, citizenship, democracy and understandings of a public sphere; in particular, how local services interpret national policy directives on such issues

The library service's role in providing a site for civic engagement and community interaction is well understood, both in policy terms (CyMAL, 2006, 2008a, 2008c; DCMS, 1999, 2001, 2003) and in academic critiques (Black & Muddiman, 1997; Brophy, 2007; Coates, 2004; Gerard, 1978; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995; Leadbeater, 2002; Murison, 1988; Usherwood *et al*, 2005). Yet, as with 'libraryness', these ambitions are often espoused in quite abstract terms, and are not reflective of (or relevant to) the situation at ground level. Aspirations for "[e]nabling community empowerment through the awareness of rights, benefits and external services" (CyMAL, 2008c: 8) via the library service seem to match some of the ideals of libraryness around the 'public good' of the setting, but such aspirations are rarely expressed in anything other than conceptual terms.

Chapter 6 examined this discrepancy in greater detail by documenting the different types of users in the branch at Llancarreg and considering how these different groups approached social and civic interactions within the library space. What is clear is that interactions of one sort or another are a regular and important part of the public library's daily routine, but also that these interactions are not always conspicuous. In an ordinary branch, sociability is manifested in markedly different ways, with some users attracted to the branch because of its more boisterous social networks and others by its 'companionable silence'. Collectively, this contributes (as the previous chapter explained) to a wider feeling of togetherness and belonging, which sustains both community and civic expression. Some of the vignettes discussed how this is exhibited on a local level, whether through the library becoming a physical focus for a particular group (Reg's gang, for example) or campaign (homing a petition on a contentious local issue).

What is striking is how these different sets of users, with differing priorities and differing methods of expressing their interactions, coexisted in such a small setting. The implications of this seem fairly clear – at a time when government policy is hinting towards a relaxation of the library ethos to encourage more chatter and informality in public libraries (DCMS, 2008b), careful thought must be given to the effect this might have on those library users

who value the more austere elements of the library environment. What Chapter 6 demonstrated is that such decisions do not always have to be an either/or; even in small branches like Llancarreg, there can be room to accommodate different types of users. This may not always happen without some conflict, but user groups can often informally and tacitly designate particular times or spaces where one set of values and rules will take priority over another.

Where this research has contributed towards wider discussions is by providing a first-hand narrative of a small community (or, more accurately, several small communities) based around one prominent social public space and identifying some of the elements of that space which supported community engagement, interaction and civic expression.

- 3) To gain ethnographic understanding of the ways in which local libraries balance competing demands and expectations of service provision, particularly in the light of emerging technologies and consumer culture

Many of the demands for reform of the library service (Coates, 2004; Davies, 2008; DCMS, 2008b; Leadbeater, 2002) have centred around the increased importance of technology as a critical challenge, specifically questioning how the service treats technology currently, and what consideration has been given to its future role. This forms part of a wider historical debate over how the service adapts to changing consumer values (Davies, 2008; Melling & Little, 2002; Miao & Bassham, 2007; Poulter, 2007; Usherwood, 1980, 1981; Wainwright, 1966).

Chapter 7 examined these two issues through an ethnographic exploration of events at Llancarreg library. The chapter focused on the range of IT facilities at the branch, and in particular how they were promoted and explained to users. What is interesting to note is how the library service was able to recognise and adapt its provision very well to some sets of users (specifically those older users who were less technologically-adept) but was slower to promote new technological services to others (such as the local teenagers whose technological expertise and expectations arguably outstripped what was available at the branch).

The same chapter also looked at how the branch promoted itself and its facilities, particularly to those local residents who were not library users. Some of the ways in which it did this were quite prosaic – the extension of a cheery welcome by a staff member to a new user can be seen as a very important human step towards making the service an inclusive one. Other techniques were more sophisticated and organised, such as the advertising of the library service on carrier bags. Yet these positive efforts were sometimes undone by a lack of resources at the front-line which left the branch itself falling some way short of the facilities it could provide to users once they arrived in the library space.

The data presented in Chapter 7 (and elsewhere) contributes towards some of the ongoing debates (eg, Coates, 2004; CyMAL, 2006; DCMS, 2003; Leadbeater, 2002; Usherwood, 1981) over how best to market and promote the library service. A great deal has been written about the macro issues of service reform and modernisation; what I have aimed to do is provide a small, localised commentary on the corresponding issues at a micro level. The data also makes a small contribution towards wider issues around how public services adopt and adapt techniques from other sectors aimed at attracting and retaining service users. By providing a commentary on some of the methods employed by the library at Llanccarreg, I hope to have given some examples of how such techniques are used in one particular sector.

- 4) To explore and document the varying and competing roles of the contemporary branch library, paying particular attention to policy aspirations in relation to leisure and learning

The complex web of policy inputs outlined in Chapter 2, whereby library policy is dictated at national, regional and local levels, has long been cited as an inherent difficulty within the public library (Black, 2000; Coates, 2004; DCMS, 2003; Greenhalgh *et al*, 1995). Strategic directions are sometimes given on particular subjects (social inclusion being an obvious example – see DCMS, 1999) without necessarily being backed up by the support or financial resources to ensure they are delivered by local authorities.

As Chapter 8 explored, this has been particularly problematic when dictating the service's priorities. Balancing the objectives of education and recreation has proved especially difficult. At times these ideas can be complementary, particularly when coalesced around looser notions of cultural provision which allow users to attach their own sets of values to library resources. Nevertheless, it can still be awkward for the library service to produce a holistic and uniform set of principles on which a national network of libraries with different users and different local needs can be based.

I have aimed to show ethnographically how the debates over the future direction of the library service are manifested in often quite prosaic ways at a local level. These range from how libraries are assessed and measured (Chapter 5) to how they promote/hinder community/civic interactions (Chapter 6) and how they deal with the challenges of technology (Chapter 7). In the next section of the chapter (9.3), I reflect on these issues in specific relation to current policy paradigms.

9.3: Research reflections

Improving on one's research experience is, of course, always a great deal easier in hindsight. Whilst I feel that the data collection was carried out effectively and conformed to all reasonable standards of research practice, my own reflections and academic convention dictate that if I were to repeat the experience, there would be elements of the research project which I might approach differently.

Principally amongst these is an issue of data collection. It may sound somewhat tokenistic to say that the research might have been improved by employing a multimodal approach to the collection of data, but I feel that to genuinely be the case. Indeed, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, the original intention with the research was to include some photographs of Llandarrog library (and others) in the final thesis by means of emphasising particular themes around public space and its uses. A sizeable amount of this kind of data was collected and appeared in early drafts – but (as I made clear in Chapter 3) it was ultimately

dispensed with. This was done primarily because of my concerns over the ethical implications of using such data. For one thing, it would have made Llanccarreg clearly identifiable, which would have run contrary to what I had assured the participants of the study. For another, some of the photographs of other libraries which were collected to provide comparisons were not subject to the same ethical safeguards as those collected at Llanccarreg; library users in the pictures did not give their consent and in some cases staff were unaware of what the photos were for. Ultimately, I felt uncomfortable with including this material. I reflect back on this decision with some mixed feelings. Whilst ethically I believe that decision to have been a sound one, the use of other types of data would have provided a fuller picture of life at a branch library, and in this instance might have provided clearer examples of some of the front-line realities of the service. In the absence of any such visual data, I hope that the ethnographic passages of the previous chapters do justice to the people and events I witnessed and that the ethnographic picture I have given of Llanccarreg is no less full without them.

The other principal area of reflection concerns my analysis. Inevitably, there is a degree of subjectivity about which emergent data themes one chooses to pursue and which ones are discontinued; this study is no different. Ultimately, my analysis took me in the directions outlined in earlier chapters – but there are some themes of the data which were not followed which might still have made for worthwhile sociological analysis. The demographics of the branch library have been discussed in passing in this thesis, but not in great detail. I have made some limited analysis of how different age groups used the branch at Llanccarreg, but I have commented little on issues, for example, around gender. Undoubtedly, there were some differences in how the sexes at Llanccarreg used the branch. My data took me in different directions, but I would suggest that the issue might be a fruitful avenue for further study. As far as this thesis is concerned, I hope that I have accurately (if perhaps somewhat simplistically at times) reflected some of the themes around gender use of the library space by way of a marker to the topic.

On a related note, my method of data analysis was a conscious and deliberate choice, and I considered other options before deciding to analyse manually the various fieldnotes from the data collection rather than use any

CAQDAS programme. I am confident that my decision was an informed one, born from a desire to familiarise myself with the data as comprehensively as possible and to seek to make the greatest number of linkages between the data. While there is no disputing that CAQDAS can help greatly with the coding of data (Carvajal, 2002; MacMillan, 2005; Weitzman, 2000), I felt that this was not enough of a reason by itself to warrant foregoing traditional manual methods of analysis. Even with the great technological developments in CAQDAS software over recent years (see Lewins, 2008; Silver & Fielding, 2008), this shortcoming still remains a concern. Furthermore, those who advocate the use of programmes such as Atlas.ti and NUD*IST/NVivo (eg, Barry, 1998; Bazeley, 2007; Lewis, 2004) acknowledge that CAQDAS can occasionally result in nuanced data being presented by the software as being more concrete than it warrants. There is also the danger that uncritical use of CAQDAS suggests there is only one 'right' way of analysing data (Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson, 1996). Whilst not ideologically opposed to the use of CAQDAS, I felt its use for a study of this nature was not something I wanted to pursue.

These very specific reflections on how the study might have been improved are set against a backdrop of a research journey which – as with any ethnographic work – threw up a range of challenges and experiences which had a bearing on the results. Some parts of the data collection process went very well; others proved more challenging, and are worth reflecting on for what they helped to teach me about the process of social research and for the part they played in my academic apprenticeship.

The most positive and enjoyable element of the research journey was the act of data collection at its most simple and straightforward – talking to the library users from Llancarreg, listening to what they had to say about their library and their experiences in it. With very few exceptions, the people I met in the library were welcoming, friendly and happy to relay their experiences and thoughts to me, making my job as a researcher surprisingly uncomplicated at times. For that, I am very grateful, not least because it afforded me the time and intellectual space to concentrate on some of the other, more subtle, elements of life in the library which might otherwise have gone unnoticed. The ease with which I could chat

with many of the core library users allowed me to notice and enquire about things like the audit culture of the branch which might otherwise have taken longer to emerge as an important aspect of how the library operated. Related to this was the relative ease I had in engaging with the library staff – Clarrie and her colleagues were enormously helpful and forthcoming with information about the library service, which meant that my queries about audit practices, bureaucratic hurdles and local authority library policy were quickly and pleasantly answered. Not only did this make it more simple to engage with some of the policy issues at stake in Llancarreg library, it also proved to be immensely enjoyable to have such a positive relationship with a group of people who might, in other circumstances, have felt apprehensive about opening up to a social researcher in their workplace. For this, I acknowledge both my own good fortune and also my sincere thanks to Clarrie, Molly and the other library staff who made me so welcome.

If these elements of the research proved to be pleasurable, there were – of course – other elements which were more difficult and at time frustrating. Some of these related to the library itself, whilst others were connected to my own relative inexperience as a social researcher and might have proved less awkward for someone more adept at analysing qualitative data. In particular, the iterative research process of analysing early research data and using that analysis to inform future work proved to be more taxing than I had initially anticipated. At first, I found it hard to analyse the data at the appropriate level – instead of making cautious conclusions about what the data might be saying about relatively superficial issues in the Llancarreg branch, I was perhaps too keen to extrapolate more significant findings about macro issues, which the data simply did not support. I attribute this primarily to my own interest in policy, which meant that in the first few months of research I was trying to read too much into the minutiae of life at Llancarreg and connect it with wider policy debates when, in fact, the trivial elements of library life in Llancarreg provided useful and interesting information in themselves and did not need to be artificially extended into wider debates. It took several months to hone my own analytic skills in this respect, and was a frustrating period (not least for my doctoral supervisors, I suspect). I feel confident that I have emerged from it a better researcher as a result, and that future research projects will be approached with lessons having been learned, but

I accept that my early research data from Llanccarreg might have been richer and more useful if I had got over this particular barrier sooner.

One final area where my research might have been made stronger was the extent to which the world outside of Llanccarreg library was explored and represented in the data. I took a deliberate decision early on to focus almost exclusively on the library in Llanccarreg. I made several forays into the wider area to acquaint myself with it, and some of the information I gleaned has made its way into the data presented in the previous chapters. There were some themes in the research, however, where I wonder whether a wider knowledge of the community of Llanccarreg outside of the library might have been both interesting and relevant to the issues being explored. In particular, the chapter on civic engagement and community could have drawn on the heritage of the area, and the wider social networks which had evolved in the suburb. Whilst I do not think that the research findings are weaker for not including this information, it may have been that closer attention to it could have allowed for connections to be made with other social debates.

9.4: Final remarks: policy recommendations and closing thoughts

No research takes place in a vacuum. The general policy background to this research was outlined in Chapter 2, but the specific policy debates running contemporaneously with the research have been particularly interesting and much of the previous chapters has been written with this in mind.

The recently-announced review of the public library service (DCMS, 2008b) provoked a range of media responses (Akbar, 2008; Brown, 2008; *Guardian*, 2008; Hanley, 2008), many of them critical, predominantly over the (then) Culture Secretary's announcement that the review would look at ways to encourage 'mobile phones, joy and chatter' back into libraries. Beneath the more contentious headline-grabbing elements, however, are five clear priorities on which the review has been focusing:

- Digital services and information literacy

- A skilled and responsive workforce
 - Capturing impact
 - A community-led service
 - Funding innovation
- (from DCMS, 2008b)

As yet, there is little detail about what direction(s) these themes will take.⁷¹ The bullet-points above, however, might indicate that the themes from the data in this study chime with elements of the policy review. For example, talk of the library service's workforce being "locally empowered" to make branches "increasingly responsive to the needs of their communities" (DCMS, 2008b) could address some of the issues raised in Chapter 5 around staff autonomy and in Chapter 6 around the extent to which the library reflects the local community. Some of the indications around information literacy also strike a chord with elements of Chapter 7 in relation to how branches cater for IT users at all levels of ability.

Crucially, however, the review makes no overt reference to considering how library performance is calculated and measured. Indeed, given the Government's inclination towards quantitative performance indicators as the primary measure of assessment (see, for example, Giddens, 2000; Lister, 1998; Newman, 2001), it seems unlikely that reform of audit practices for the library service (or, for that matter, other public services) is likely to be high on the policy agenda. As the data in Chapter 5 showed, it may well be desirable to reconsider how the library service is assessed. By doing so, and by reflecting on those (qualitative) elements which make up part of the service's inherent appeal, it may then become possible to direct resources towards extending and improving these elements rather than concentrating scarce resources onto the arguably narrow criteria of book lends and attendance at organised events.

One issue which relates to this, albeit rather tangentially, is how the service is adapting to shifts towards radio-frequency identification (RFID). In many local authorities, public libraries are installing RFID tags into library books which allow users to then borrow and return them using self-service machines

⁷¹ According to the DCMS website, the review was due to report its findings in June 2009; as yet, however, no such report has been published.

rather than having to queue at an issue desk. This streamlines the process of lending and returning materials, and also is thought to free up staff to spend more time engaging with users rather than scanning books. The scheme is still in its early stages,⁷² but research on its effects would be valuable in developing it further. Of particular interest is whether the scheme does result in staff spending more time interacting with users and contributing towards the service's libraryness, or whether the time saved on scanning books has been filled with other tasks within branches. While the current review makes no mention of RFID, the issue clearly ties in with themes around exploiting technology and responding to community needs.

It is significant that the priorities of the review make no explicit reference to citizenship or civic engagement. Given the focus on citizenship by the Labour administration in power at the time of the research (eg, Goldsmith, 2007), it is perhaps surprising that few of its policy pronouncements made a clear link between civic engagement and the public library service. As Chapter 6 discussed, libraries do have an important role to play in fostering street-level conceptions of civic exchange and participation – but at present, there is little practical guidance for how this could be further developed. Indeed, I would go so far as to posit that a national network of nearly four thousand public libraries (CIPFA, 2008) offers far greater potential to develop and explore the government's citizenship agenda than is currently being pursued. As Chapter 6 and Chapter 8 have made clear, the physical nature of the library space, coupled with the public esteem in which it is held and its perceived neutrality, makes it an ideal location to cultivate and advance social and civic interaction. By harnessing this potential and giving front-line staff a greater idea of how the average branch can make itself a community hub (and by valuing such an approach in performance indicators), the library service can genuinely become both community-led and a source of civic pride. This may involve approaches which are relatively prosaic – making branches warm, welcoming comfortable places to sit with facilities which allow users to

⁷² No RFID scheme had been developed at Llancarreg during the research period, hence the lack of references to it in the data. However, schemes do operate in some of Llancarreg's neighbouring authorities, and a similar scheme is likely to emerge in Llancarreg over the coming years.

stay there for as long as they want – but as the data from Llancarreg showed, lack of resources or lack of strategic direction is still currently preventing this from being a given for the service. This is an area where further research into whether (and how) policy ambitions are being met by actions on the ground at the front-line of the library service would be beneficial. Indeed, research on the specific issue of ‘libraryness’ and citizenship could be helpful in exploring whether, in a time of financial austerity, the public library has become a more or less important focal point for expressions of civic participation; a resource which provides free access to information might attract more users, but might also be an area where cutbacks hit the most civically disengaged the hardest.

The review’s pledge towards ‘digital services and information literacy’ is to be welcomed; as Chapter 7 showed, provision in relation to technology is often only partial in its scope. What is crucial, however, is that developing information literacy is not just targeted at those groups whose IT knowledge is poor. IT starter classes for complete novices are an important and valued element of the library service’s provision – but they are generally already a standard part of what the service offers. In contrast, classes and facilities to develop skills for those with some limited knowledge are harder to locate; as the data showed, younger users wanting to develop or formalise their IT knowledge from a basic level would often have to go beyond the library service to do so. By ‘joining-up’ the library service’s IT provision role with adult education agendas elsewhere, this gap could be addressed within the library service and, in doing so, take advantage of the relaxed, informal nature of the setting which gives it an advantage over more formal education settings elsewhere.

Linked to this is the wider and arguably most important question for the policy review and researchers of public libraries to consider; namely, what the service’s main priorities are. As previous chapters have documented, this issue permeates so many of the wider elements of provision, from what is measured in a public library, to how it is promoted and marketed to how it is interpreted by users of the service. The decision is not as simple as directing the service towards being principally a facility for recreation or for education; it is much more complex. Yet by identifying the elements of the service which are considered

most important for users (through research) and for government (through policy), the service can then be clearer about what it does – and it will then be in a stronger position to attract new users by giving a more clearly-defined idea of where the library service fits into people's lives. A library service with self-confidence and a sense of purpose over where its modern mission lies will be in a much stronger position to cope with the challenges of the coming decades.

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